STORMS OF THE NIGHT

PROLOGUE:

BOMANI

CHAPTER ONE

Bomani’s vision narrowed through the slit of his helm. Seven enemy galleys, blackened and monstrous, littered the beach, their decks spewing fire. Further out, a colossal ship loomed over the horizon, its infernal flames casting jagged shadows across the shoreline.

“Wedge!” he roared, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade. The sellswords surged forward, their formation tightening into a deadly spearhead with Bomani at its tip.

Prince Keita appeared on Bomani’s right, a gleaming figure of authority in golden armor that caught and scattered the firelight. His expression was calm, but his eyes—cold and lifeless—burned with the savage fire of a warrior who had long since buried mercy.

To Bomani’s left, he spotted an unexpected figure—Darko, clutching a spear in his gnarled hand, the weapon steady despite his age.

“This is no place for you, Father,” Bomani barked, frustration lacing his tone. “Leave this to me.”

Darko’s grip on the spear tightened, his stance unyielding. “A father’s duty is to protect his son, even from himself,” he replied evenly.

It wasn’t the time for argument, but Bomani couldn’t help himself. “Don’t die,” he urged, his voice softer now.

The old man’s face was a map of hard years and harsher battles, his skin creased with time, his bones weary under the weight of countless campaigns. Yet, defiance burned in his faded eyes—a spark of the unrelenting warrior he had once been. Darko had sworn an oath to die by the sword, not withering away in the quiet indignity of a deathbed.

Bomani, taken as a child and raised far from his bloodline, had become a mirror of Darko’s younger self. He moved with the same strength, precision, and fire that the old soldier had once possessed. Darko had shaped him, passing down every skill honed over a lifetime of wars, battles, and bloodshed.

The weight of command bore down heavily on Darko’s shoulders. Twenty thousand men—the famed Desert Swords of the Songhai Empire—stood at the ready, awaiting his orders. “You will lead them one day,” Darko rasped, his voice worn thin by years of battle and the toll of age. His words carried a gravity that matched the fading strength in his frame.

The Desert Swords were legendary: mercenaries of unwavering loyalty, their blades sworn to the highest bidder. They had fought for kings, chiefs, and warlords alike, even serving the enigmatic Sea Lords beyond Songhai’s borders. Bomani had traveled far and wide

with them, sharpening his skills in foreign lands, but he felt the growing shadow of uncertainty. He burned to prove himself worthy of his father's legacy, but a silent fear gnawed at him: would he inherit the Desert Swords in their full glory, or a broken remnant of what they once were?

Niani loomed in Bomani's memory like a half-forgotten dream from his childhood. He had last seen the city at the age of four, when he still clung to the hem of Darko's cloak. Now, it pulsed with life, its vast sheltered harbor brimming with ships from every corner of the continent.

The city sprawled along the banks of the Niger River, a labyrinth of clay walls and bustling streets. At its heart stood the towering Great Mosque, its minaret rising like a beacon, guiding sailors' home. The streets twisted and coiled away from the river, alive with a kaleidoscope of buildings: warehouses stacked high with goods from distant lands; gambling dens spilling raucous energy into the night; fighting pits where the cheers of frenzied crowds vibrated through the air; and taverns serving food and liquor infused with the tastes of far-off places.

Nestled among these were the opulent homes of wealthy merchants, their courtyards shielded by intricate lattice screens, and temples devoted to unfamiliar gods, their domes and spires clawing at the heavens. Even as a child, Niani had overwhelmed Bomani—its sounds, smells, and colors seared into his memory, a sensory cacophony that left an indelible mark.

The true heartbeat of Niani lay along its waterfront, a sprawling marketplace alive with ceaseless trade. By day

and night, it thrummed with activity as goods changed hands in quick bargains or whispered deals. Hunched old women wove through the crowds, hawking banana juice and goat's milk from glazed jugs and calabashes. Sailors, merchants, and desert men from every nation mingled under the sun, their faces weathered by countless journeys.

The air was thick with a babel of voices—bartering in countless tongues, spiced with bursts of laughter and curses. Spiced liquors flowed freely, their warmth loosening purses and tempers alike. Bomani took it all in, his warrior's composure briefly at odds with the flicker of memory: a boy standing at these very docks, wide-eyed and in awe, still too young to grasp the weight of the world.

Now, as a man returned to Niani not as an observer but as its defender, he felt the enormity of the moment. The city he had once gazed at in wonder now stood under threat, its fate tied to his own.

Two decades had passed since a wide-eyed Bomani, still sucking his thumb, had wandered these docks. Now, a seasoned warrior, he was back, not as a curious child, but as the city's defender. A ruthless warlord and his forty-thousand strong army loomed, a threat Bomani, heir to Darko's legacy, was determined to confront.

The fires of battle had raged for three nights. Bomani, perched atop the city wall, watched in grim fascination as enemy galleys, locked in a deadly dance with flaming arrows, became infernos before plunging beneath the blood-reddened river. Yet, the sheer number of the

enemy proved overwhelming. They surged ashore in a relentless tide, their battering rams pounding against the mighty Ivory Gate, its once gleaming surface now scarred and splintered.

Bomani flung his helm aside, a primal yell erupting from his throat. Keita echoed the cry, and a wave of sound, a chorus of desperation and defiance, roared from the entire army. They surged forward, a tide of steel against a storm of arrows. The air thrummed with the deadly song of loosed shafts, each one a streak of death aimed to find its mark. Men stumbled and fell, their armor no match for the relentless hail. Yet, the press continued, a desperate gamble to reach the enemy lines before the rain of death thinned their ranks to a critical point. Above, stones dislodged from the battlements plummeted like monstrous hail, adding to the carnage below. The very ground trembled with the earth-shattering boom of rams against the Ivory Gate, its once-proud surface groaning under the assault.

The Ivory Gate loomed ahead, its once-gleaming surface marred by the relentless assault. A surging mass of enemy soldiers strained against a massive battering ram – a red mahogany shaft capped with a vicious bronze head. Archers flanking them loosed arrows in a deadly flurry, aiming for any sliver of exposed flesh on the gate's defenders.

Bomani launched his spear, skewering the first archer. His comrades followed suit, their spears finding their mark. Bomani's archers, ever vigilant, cut down any enemy targeting him. He weaved through the throng, his sword a blur of deadly precision, his movements swift

and lethal. The ground, a treacherous mix of mud and blood, offered scant footing. Men from both sides grappled and fell, the press of battle unrelenting.

Beneath the looming Ivory Gate, enemy soldiers scrambled to reinforce the battering ram. Bomani, his face streaked with blood, fought with a grim determination. While some warriors reveled in the chaos, Bomani focused on survival and pushing back the enemy. Prince Keita, charging into the fray, impaled a soldier with a swift spear thrust. The man lurched off the ground for a horrifying moment before collapsing. A warrior, engulfed in flames and clutching an enemy banner, stumbled towards them – a crazed symbol of the battle's madness. With a heavy swing, Bomani cut the burning warrior down, a tragic necessity in the heat of the moment.

A spear thudded against Bomani's shield, a jarring reminder of the chaos. Two enemies charged, their faces grim masks of war. Darko thundered by on horseback, a whirlwind of steel carving a path through the enemy ranks. A roar of defiance rose from the battlements, the defenders finding renewed vigor. The battering ram, a once-mighty weapon, lay abandoned in the mud, its crew scattered or locked in a desperate struggle for survival. Bomani, discarding his shield for greater mobility, faced off against a hulking spearman. With a lightning-fast strike, he split the man open from shoulder to armpit. He barely deflected a blow from a foe with a swordfish-crested helm, the clang echoing amidst the cacophony of battle.

Darko surged past Bomani, his sword a whirlwind of destruction, shearing through limbs with horrifying efficiency. The old warrior, a veteran of countless battles for over four decades, had served in the Khushaniss royal guard before the calamity, protecting the king and his family. This past, he had kept hidden from Bomani, raising him as his own son. Enemy soldiers, their shields shattered by the brutal fighting, fell beneath the relentless assault. Few on the enemy side had managed to cross the river with their shields intact.

Bomani scrambled over the abandoned battering ram as the enemy lines faltered. He fought with a frenzy, lashing out at any attacker in his path. A flicker of movement caught his eye – two archers aiming at him. In a desperate move, he snatched a broken enemy shield, using it to deflect their arrows. One arrow pierced his shoulder, searing pain lancing through him. With a snarl, he snapped the shield and charged at the archers, his movements fueled by a surge of adrenaline. He dispatched them swiftly, but the victory tasted hollow.

Panic clawed at him. A glance around revealed no sign of Darko. Another arrow clattered against his cheek, whispering death past his ear. The world tilted, and he nearly collapsed into the mud, only to find support on the spear protruding from the chest of Keita’s fallen golden soldier. He stood amidst a macabre tableau of corpses, both enemy and friend, the weight of loss threatening to bury him. Downstream, the river choked on the smoldering hulks of enemy galleys. The fires had scattered the enemy using the battering ram, but the battle raged along the shores. Bomani spotted Keita’s

elite golden soldiers, likely attempting to push the enemy back into the water as they swarmed from the burning ships.

The fiercest fighting raged near the Ivory Gate, the market echoing with the clash of steel and desperate screams. War horns blared a mournful symphony, punctuated by the terrified wails of the fallen. Bomani barked a command, “For the Ivory Gate!” Prince Keita echoed the cry, “For the Ivory Gate!” and they sprinted forward, a tide of steel against a storm.

A chorus of hoarse yells erupted from Bomani’s men, “Songhai!” answered by the prince’s golden army with a thunderous, “Lion Prince! Lion Prince!” Through the confines of his helm, a cacophony assaulted Bomani’s senses: the anguished shrieks of the wounded, the crackling fury of flames devouring nearby buildings, the mournful wail of war horns, and the piercing calls of enemy trumpets. Smoke stung his eyes, and the stench of burning wood and blood filled the air. Every turn revealed a tapestry of chaos – desperate battles erupting in the streets, figures writhing in pain, and flames licking at the sky. Yet, Bomani’s gaze scanned frantically for Darko, a growing knot of worry tightening in his chest.

A thunderous crash echoed across the river as a massive stone slammed into a galley. The billowing smoke obscured its origin, leaving Bomani uncertain if it belonged to his forces or the enemy. His unit had disintegrated in the chaos; every soldier, gold or mercenary, was now fighting for their own survival. A single, desperate thought pounded in his head: Where is Darko?

Five days and nights of relentless fighting had ravaged the marketplace. The stench of death hung heavy in the air, a grim reminder of the protracted battle. Darko, a mercenary by trade, had anticipated a three-day skirmish. Now, staring at the mounting casualties among his own ranks, he questioned his decision.

Bomani, at twenty years old, had emerged as a beacon of courage and leadership. His peerless swordsmanship and exceptional reflexes, honed to a razor's edge, made him a formidable warrior. Darko's men rallied behind him, their trust in his tactical prowess unwavering.

The initial two days saw Darko fight alongside Bomani. He witnessed the young man's prowess firsthand, as Bomani emerged victorious from duels with Soso commanders. A flicker of pride warmed Darko's heart – the boy he'd raised was blossoming into a formidable warrior.

Bomani stood amidst the carnage, mostly enemy casualties, his weapon heavy in his hand. A few loyal soldiers remained, the others fallen or scattered. The metallic tang of blood clung to his armor and skin. He raised his head towards the Ivory Gate, yearning for an end to the conflict. Exhaustion and a fierce determination to see the enemy defeated etched lines on his face.

The battle had devolved into a brutal struggle for survival. Men, wounded and desperate, staggered from the river, their coughs wracked with phlegm. Bomani, his vision narrowed by exhaustion, led his dwindling troop through the carnage, granting mercy to those still

clinging to life. The once grand battlefield had shrunk to the confines of his bloodshot gaze. Enemies, overwhelmed by his relentless assault, either fled or fell before him. Their fear was palpable. A primal roar erupted from Bomani's throat, a rallying cry that echoed off the river. Blood slicked his arm to the elbow, glinting under the dying light. In a trance of exhaustion and battle fever, Bomani heard his soldiers calling him "desert warrior," a title he wore like a shroud.

The battle fever, that warped sense of time and self, had him in its grip. The world narrowed, the past and future fading until only the present fight remained. Fear and thought dissolved, replaced by a primal focus on survival. He felt no pain, no fatigue, just the relentless dance of blade against blade. The enemy, consumed by exhaustion and fear, seemed to move in slow motion, allowing him to counter their attacks with practiced ease.

"I am a desert warrior," he roared, a primal cry echoing across the bloodstained battlefield. In the throes of battle fever, he felt invincible, death a mere bystander. The enemy pressed on, but their strikes were sluggish, their resolve crumbling. In a whirlwind of movement, Bomani disarmed and subdued his foes one by one. A warrior, his weapon shattered, lunged with a desperate thrust. Bomani knocked him back with a swift kick, a harsh laugh escaping his lips. He passed a fallen standard, a symbol of Soso's dominance, and cleaved it in two with a disdainful swing.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the chaos, a two-handed sword swinging wildly. The duel was a blur of

steel until a dagger plunged beneath the attacker's armor. Bomani never saw the attacker's face, only the desperate offering of a soldier on the ground – a pouch of coins, a plea for mercy. He secured the offering alongside others taken from fallen foes, the weight a grim reminder of the battle's cost.

"Bomani!" A voice pierced through the haze of battle, a lifeline thrown through the fog of war. Bomani whirled around, his bloodshot eyes scanning the battlefield transformed into a grotesque tableau. Smoke plumed from the smoldering husks of buildings, their charred remains casting an eerie pallor over the scene. Bodies, both enemy, Songhai golden army and the Desertswords, lay strewn like discarded dolls across the bloodstained mud. Vultures circled overhead, their ragged wings beating a slow, chilling rhythm against the backdrop of dying moans.

"Bomani!" Prince Keita called again, his voice strained with urgency. "There you are!"

Exhaustion crashed over Bomani like a tidal wave. For hours, he had searched for Darko in the throes of battle fever, the world reduced to a brutal dance of kill or be killed. The air, thick with the stench of blood and iron, hung heavy in his lungs. His ears thrummed with a dreadful silence, the absence of clashing steel a stark reminder of the immense cost of victory. Now, as Keita approached, a cold dread coiled in Bomani's gut, a sickening premonition that threatened to suffocate him. He wanted to voice the question gnawing at his insides, but the words felt like ashes on his tongue, a truth too terrible to utter.

Exhilaration warred with exhaustion as Bomani staggered out of the marketplace. The air was thick with the metallic tang of blood and the hollow echoes of victory. Cheers erupted from the Niani townsfolk, their voices a chaotic chorus of unfamiliar words. “Shujaa wa jangwani!” they hailed him. “Desert Warrior!”—a title forged in the fires of battle. Yet, the words felt distant, muted, as if coming from another world.

At the foot of the Ivory Gate, Bomani stopped. The once-pristine surface of the gate was now scarred and battered, a grim testament to the violence it had withstood. The cheers faded, replaced by a heavy ringing silence in his ears. Each step up the weathered stairway was an effort, the weight of his armor pressing down on him like the memories of the battle. Dread coiled tighter with every step, a cold knot in his stomach.

He couldn’t shake the image of Darko—the old soldier who had raised him, ever precise, ever meticulous—so out of place amid the blood-soaked chaos of the battlefield. Darko had always been steady, his hands careful and deliberate, his presence a constant. The thought of him lying wounded—or worse—was unbearable.

At the top of the stairs, Prince Keita placed a hand on Bomani’s shoulder, the gesture steadying him for a moment. “Come,” Keita said gently, his voice threaded with concern. “The healers are tending to the wounded in the gatehouse.”

Bomani’s heart pounded against his ribs, each beat louder than the last. He wasn’t sure which he feared

more: finding Darko alive but broken, or finding him gone altogether.

The heavy oak door to the gatehouse loomed ahead. Keita pushed it open, and the scent of blood and herbs spilled out. Inside, the makeshift infirmary was a grim sanctuary, its cots lined with wounded soldiers. Bomani's breath caught as his eyes fell on a familiar figure lying motionless on one of the beds, his frame shrouded by shadow and stained crimson.

There, on a cot that seemed too small for him, lay Darko. His face was pale and drawn, the vigor that had once defined him replaced by frailty. Relief crashed over Bomani like a breaking wave, leaving his knees weak. A trembling breath escaped his lips as he rushed to Darko's side, the distant cheers of victory now forgotten. "Darko?" he whispered, his voice cracking.

The room darkened further as Bomani stood over the man who had been more than a father to him. Darko's stillness froze him in place. His chest, usually so strong and steady, barely rose, if at all. The master healer stepped forward, a gourd clutched tightly in his hands. His face was a map of weariness and sorrow.

"Dragon's Breath," the healer murmured softly.

Bomani swallowed hard, the words sinking into him like a dagger. He understood. This wasn't a cure—it was a mercy, a comfort for a journey no soldier wished to take. Grief rose like a tide, threatening to drown him, but he forced himself to nod.

The healer placed the gourd in his hands, a silent acknowledgment of what was to come. He left quietly, the door closing softly behind him.

With trembling hands, Bomani leaned down and uncovered Darko's chest. His breath hitched. The raw ache in his stomach deepened, twisting into something unbearable. But it wasn't the blood, the wounds, or the torn flesh that struck him hardest—it was the absence of the steady rise and fall that signaled life.

Darko stirred weakly, a faint smile tugging at his cracked lips. "Always pictured myself meeting the end with a sword in hand," he rasped, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "Didn't see an axe coming. Not quite how I imagined it, eh?" A ragged cough shook his frail body, each breath a struggle.

Bomani forced a smile, though tears welled in his eyes, threatening to spill. "No, Father," he choked out, his voice thick with emotion. "Not the way we imagined it at all."

He stood beside the cot, utterly speechless. Darko wasn't just a mentor—he was family. A lifetime of shared battles and lessons flickered through Bomani's mind, memories of laughter, stern corrections, and silent moments of pride. He had always known this day might come, but now that it was here, it hit like a blade to the gut.

Darko, despite the pain etched into his features, managed another weak smile. "Dragon's Breath," he rasped, his words laced with resignation.

“They say you fought valiantly, Bomani,” Prince Keita said softly, stepping forward. His voice carried the weight of both admiration and grief. “You saved countless lives. Your name will be sung in taverns for generations to come.”

Bomani’s lips curved into a bittersweet smile, though his heart ached. He turned back to Darko, who had closed his eyes briefly, gathering the strength to speak. “You made me proud today,” Darko whispered, his voice growing fainter but steadier with each word. “Your own father… he would have been proud too.”

Bomani’s hand tightened around Darko’s, a silent rebuttal burning in his throat. “You are my father,” he said fiercely, a tear slipping down his cheek. His voice trembled, but there was no hesitation. “You will always be my father.”

Darko’s faint smile faltered, replaced by a grimace as pain lanced through his body. He sucked in a shallow breath. “I know,” he rasped, his voice breaking. “I raised you as my own, a duty I held close to my heart.” A long silence stretched between them, heavy with the weight of unspoken truths.

Finally, Darko’s eyes opened again, glassy but intent. “There’s something I haven’t told you,” he began, his voice straining against the pull of his injuries. “I was entrusted with your protection. To raise you, to train you… until you were ready.” He paused, the effort of speaking leaving him trembling. “Your true name is Bomani Niss, son of Gama Niss.”

The words struck like a hammer, shattering the fragile world Bomani thought he knew. His breath hitched as tears welled anew, his mind a storm of questions he couldn’t yet voice. All he managed was a single, choked whisper: “My father?”

Darko’s grip tightened briefly, surprisingly firm despite his failing strength. “He would be so proud of the man you’ve become,” he rasped. A violent fit of coughing overtook him, stealing his breath and leaving him weaker than before. There was so much left unsaid, a lifetime of secrets hanging heavy in the air between them.

The weight of Darko’s revelation crashed down on Bomani, splintering his sense of self. Everything he thought he knew—his identity, his past—felt fragile and insubstantial, like smoke vanishing in the wind. Desert warrior, sellsword—titles he’d once worn with pride—now felt hollow, like ill-fitting masks for a man who didn’t yet understand his own reflection.

He had spent a lifetime believing Darko was the only father he would ever need. And now, in the shadow of loss, he learned of a legacy tied to a name he had never known and a destiny he could not yet fathom.

“I never meant for you to find out like this,” Darko rasped, his voice heavy with regret. “Forgive me, my prince.”

The words landed like a blow, but before Bomani could respond, Darko reached out with trembling fingers. His hand pressed something into Bomani’s palm—a ring, cool and intricate, its weight unfamiliar yet significant.

Bomani held it up, his breath catching as his eyes traced the detailed carvings etched into the metal. The design was adorned with a symbol he didn't recognize—a circular pattern of strength and authority.

"The Adinkrahene," Darko whispered. "Find the one who breastfeeds the sun. Show her the ring…" His voice faltered, unraveling into a violent fit of coughing. The rest of his words slipped away, leaving only a silence that felt like a chasm.

Bomani's gaze dropped to the ring, the cold metal pressing into his numb palm like a question he wasn't ready to answer. Grief and confusion swirled within him, a storm of emotions threatening to pull him under. He barely noticed as they moved Darko's frail body away from the cot, the life that had animated him now drained to a flicker.

A chilling realization struck Bomani like a blade to the heart—Dragon's breath was no longer needed. The revelation itself had become a more potent potion, one that acted as swiftly and finally as any poison.

Time blurred. Hours passed, though Bomani barely felt their weight. He sat motionless, the ring a constant, heavy presence in his hand. His gaze fixed on its intricate engravings, his thoughts circling endlessly around Darko's words. Even when they came to take Darko's body, Bomani didn't stir, his world narrowing to the cold metal in his grasp and the hollow ache in his chest.

They buried Darko near the Niger River, in a quiet grove where the water flowed ceaselessly. It was a place Darko

had cherished in his twilight years, a rare respite from the hardships of his life. Bomani's desert warriors remained at his side, their stoic faces marked by the weight of shared loss. For five days they waited in silence, holding vigil for their fallen leader and giving Bomani the space to weather the storm of emotions that churned within him.

The Niani chieftain approached with lavish rewards—gold, silver, women, and slaves—tokens of gratitude to honor the savior of his city. But Bomani felt only a hollow ache as he accepted the spoils. The weight of the ring in his palm outweighed all the treasures in the world. He ensured his men received their fair share, an act of loyalty to Darko and his comrades. Yet, as the days of celebration passed on their way back to Ait Benhaddou, Bomani felt untethered, adrift in a sea of unanswered questions.

"Leading an army is no easy feat," said Sobek, one of the generals, his tone measured and thoughtful. His horse kept pace with Bomani's red stallion. "But Darko prepared you for this your entire life. And if you need guidance, do not hesitate—come to me or the others."

"Thank you, Sobek," Bomani replied, his voice barely above a whisper. He sat tall on his stallion, his gaze fixed on the city rising in the distance—a city that had shaped him, though it now felt strange in the shadow of his revelations.

Ait Benhaddou.

It loomed on the horizon like a mirage, its earthen walls and majestic kasbahs sculpted from the desert itself. The

city was a masterpiece of ancient architecture, a labyrinth of narrow, winding streets that whispered of centuries of history.

Towering kasbahs dominated the skyline, their sun-dried mud brick exteriors adorned with intricate geometric patterns and vibrant colors. They stood as symbols of power and resilience, their weathered surfaces a testament to the artistry and endurance of the Berber people who had built them.

As Bomani drew closer, memories of the city's vibrant life filled his mind. He could almost hear the bustling markets alive with the bartering of merchants, their voices mingling with the aroma of exotic spices. The rhythmic clapping of dancers echoed faintly in his memory, their bodies swaying to the beat of drums. Gnawa musicians sang haunting melodies, their songs laced with longing and sorrow that seemed to drift on the desert wind.

The weather, as unforgiving as the land itself, shaped the people of Ait Benhaddou. Scorching heat by day and bitter cold by night. Yet the city thrived, its inhabitants as resilient as the towering kasbahs they called home.

Bomani's heart was heavy as he gazed upon the city. The memories of the past days clung to him—the chaos of the battle in Niani, the loss of Darko, the man he had thought was his father. The weight of Darko's final revelation pressed against him like an unrelenting wind, stirring a storm of emotions he couldn't yet contain.

As Ait Benhaddou drew nearer, so too did the enormity of the responsibility that awaited him. He was no longer

simply a warrior. He was now the leader of Darko's army, a mantle that felt impossibly heavy.

But it was more than the army that burdened him. It was the revelation about his past, the truth about his bloodline. The boy raised by Darko, the Desert Warrior revered by his comrades, now carried a name he didn't recognize. A name tied to a lineage he didn't understand —a missing piece of a puzzle he hadn't even known existed.

Bomani turned the ring over in his hand, its cold surface pulsing with an unspoken purpose. The intricate design, foreign yet familiar, seemed to hum with the weight of something far greater than himself. He stared into the horizon, where the vast unknown stretched endlessly, its promise and peril waiting to be uncovered.

A single, burning question consumed him: Who was Bomani Niss?

CHAPTER TWO

DAMU.

The sun hung high in a cloudless sky, its heat searing the earth, but Damu barely felt it. He stood at the edge of the hill, his gaze fixed on the village below. Smoke coiled between the trees, rising in dark, jagged columns that marred the horizon. Screams carried on the wind, sharp and brittle, mingling with the harsh clash of metal. Somewhere in the distance, the faint tinkling of wind chimes swayed at the forest's edge, a fragile reminder of a peace now shattered.

The Frogeaters had come.

They swept through the valley like a plague, leaving villages like this one in ruins. Even from this distance, Damu could see their shadowy figures moving through the chaos below, their curved blades flashing as they hacked through what little resistance remained. The villagers, his people, were scattering like leaves in a storm, and still the Frogeaters pressed on, methodical and unrelenting.

Damu’s hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. The leather scabbard was smooth beneath his palm, yet the weapon felt foreign, as though it belonged to someone else. His jaw clenched, and a hollow ache bloomed in his chest, equal parts rage and fear. He wanted to scream, to charge down the hill and meet the invaders head-on, but his legs felt leaden, pinned in place by the weight of the moment.

You must not show fear, Rhoko had told him once. The words drifted into his mind like a voice from a dream, distant yet clear. Back at Ramshorn, it had been easy to nod along, to repeat the mantra in the safety of the training circle. But here, standing on this hill with the smoke of ruin rising to meet him, those words felt like a taunt.

A gust of wind stirred the ostrich plumes in his headband, their vibrant reds and yellows marking him as a warrior of Azania. Around his neck hung the necklace of carved amber beads, glinting like fire whenever the sun caught them. The soft chiming of copper and silver bangles at his wrists and ankles added a faint, rhythmic

music to his stillness. It was the adornment of a fighter, the uniform of one sworn to protect, and yet Damu stood frozen.

He wanted to believe Rhoko's words, to live up to the weight of his training. But the truth was undeniable—he was scared. The Frogeaters had already destroyed so many villages, and he could see the same fate unfolding here, another scar left on Azania's land. Yet alongside the fear, anger burned hot and insistent, clawing at his chest.

Smoke blurred his view of the village, but he didn't need to see every detail to know the outcome. Huts reduced to ash. Families torn apart. His grip tightened further on his sword. You must not show fear. But Damu was more than afraid—he was furious.

He remembered the day he departed Ramshorn Castle, his father's stronghold and the heart of Azania's greatest city. The castle rose in imposing stone, a fortress of towering walls that cast long shadows over the cobbled streets below. Even the narrowest alleys were paved with care, their stones worn smooth by generations of footsteps.

Azania was never more beautiful than at daybreak. North of Ramshorn, the brotherhood halls lined the riverbanks like a procession of palaces, their banners rippling in the morning breeze. Upriver, the domes and towers of the council seat pierced the sky on both sides of the river, the stone bridges connecting them bustling with halls, homes, and endless movement. Downstream, beneath the white marble walls and arched windows of

the Royal Palace, the manses of the pious clustered close together, huddled like children around an ancient matron’s feet.

Beyond it all loomed the dueling arenas, vast and sunlit, where Damu had proven himself time and again. He could almost hear the roar of the crowd in his memory, the way they chanted his name, “Damu of Ramshorn!” The arenas had been his refuge, his proving ground, a place where he’d shown the world—and himself—that he was no longer a boy but a man, strong and unyielding. Even now, those echoes seemed to reach across time, whispering encouragement as he remembered his final farewell.

He had stood in the great courtyard, his family gathered around him. His sisters, Chiku and Akina, clung to him, their faces solemn but proud. Hami, his elder brother, had clasped his shoulder with a grip as firm as iron, his eyes carrying the weight of unspoken words. And there was Jirani, the little one, barely weaned, still nestled at Belkis’s breast.

Belkis. She was not his birth mother, but she had raised him and Akina as though they were her own. That day, she had stood apart from the others, her presence calm and unshakable as always. When the time came for him to leave, she had stepped forward, her dark eyes steady, and lifted her hand high above his head.

“Walk with courage, my son,” she had said, her voice low but filled with strength. “You are never alone.”

As her words carried across the courtyard, the light seemed to shift around her, and Damu could have sworn

he saw her spirit rise above her, luminous and watchful. It hovered just above his head, a flickering shape of golden light, before settling over him like a mantle. It was as if her very essence had wrapped itself around him, binding him with an unbreakable blessing.

Even now, standing on this hill far from Ramshorn, he could feel that blessing. When the Frogeaters' screams grew louder, when the acrid scent of smoke filled his lungs and fear clawed at his chest, he thought of Belkis's spirit above him, her quiet strength still shielding him. The memory of her words steadied his trembling hands. You are never alone.

The city of his childhood felt impossibly far away now, like the faded edges of a dream. Yet Belkis's blessing remained, a light in the darkness, whispering courage into the depths of his soul.

Chieftain Zahur, Damu's father, stood tall, his presence as commanding as the legacy he carried. Pride and concern etched deep lines into his dark, chiseled face, the unyielding resolve of his ancestors reflected in every sharp feature. His eyes, like polished obsidian, gleamed with piercing intensity, scrutinizing all who dared approach. The marks of time—etched lines along his cheeks and brow—were not signs of wear but a testament to ambition and hard-won authority.

As a scion of the Azanian dynasty, Zahur's heritage was woven from the rich tapestry of Ramshorn nobility. His skin, like burnished mahogany, seemed to drink in the light, radiating an aura of strength and power. The golden trim on his armor caught the flickering torchlight,

a subtle reminder of the wealth and prestige of the tribe he led.

His voice, low and resonant, carried the weight of authority that brooked no dissent. Each word was laced with the subtle nuance of Alkebulan diplomacy, tempered by the fire of his unyielding principles. Zahur's presence was more than imposing—it embodied the indomitable spirit of their people.

"You are too young for the task you ask, son," Zahur had said, his deep voice reverberating through the great hall of Ramshorn Castle.

"I can fight, Father," Damu had replied, stepping forward. His voice was steady, though his heart thundered in his chest. "The Frogeaters are scattered across the northern riverlands and the black forests. They've taken strongholds, slaughtered innocent villagers. Let me stop them. Let me prove myself to you."

Zahur had studied him in silence, his gaze heavy with the weight of judgment. Beside him, Rhoko stood like a stone sentinel, his expression unreadable. The two men exchanged a glance—a silent conversation Damu wasn't privy to. Finally, Zahur nodded.

"Very well," he said.

And just like that, there were no more arguments. The decision had been made.

Damu had left Ramshorn accompanied by his most trusted fifteen barefooted warriors, men who had fought beside him in the dueling arenas, men whose loyalty he did not question. But his father had given him more—a

force of three hundred seasoned soldiers. A gift, or perhaps a test.

“These are your men now,” Zahur had said, his tone as firm as a blade’s edge. “They are your responsibility. Whatever they do wrong, you will be held accountable. Their victory will be your victory, and their failures will be your failure.”

The weight of those words had struck Damu like a hammer. Fear cut through his heart like a dagger, sharp and unrelenting. He had expected the chance to prove himself, yes—but not like this. Not with three hundred lives depending on his choices.

As they marched north, the words of his father rang in his ears, as heavy as the blade strapped to his side. The Frogeaters awaited him, scattered and dangerous. But so did his fears.

Damu and his army rode north, leaving the city of Azania behind. The towering walls and bustling streets gave way to the vast, open lands of Mendefera. They followed a rutted farm road that wound across torn fields and into woods threaded with streams. Damu led the way, spurring his horse into a brisk, heedless trot until the trees thickened around him, swallowing the road in their shadow.

Behind him, Towila and Monkeyface rode hard to keep up, followed by Chacha, Tails, Fish-Neck, Ali, and the rest of his fifteen barefooted warriors. The three hundred soldiers his father had entrusted to him followed farther back, their armor clinking and their horses snorting as they navigated the uneven terrain.

Wolves howled in the distance, their cries rising like ghosts on the wind, and Bahati's heavy breathing sounded just behind him. No one spoke.

From time to time, Damu glanced over his shoulder, checking to see that the three hundred hadn't fallen too far behind—and to assure himself that they were still following at all. He didn't know these men. They weren't like the fifteen he had fought beside in the dueling arenas, the men he trusted with his life. These were his father's soldiers, strangers whose loyalty belonged to Zahur, not him. The thought gnawed at him, and a question lingered in his mind: Did my father know each of his men?

The first two nights on the road, Damu kept to his fifteen. They camped together, apart from the larger group. He preferred their company—their laughter, their crude jokes, the unspoken bond they shared. But on the third night, Nneoma had approached him.

"You have to connect with the others," she had said, her voice firm but kind. She had always been the one to tell him the things he didn't want to hear.

"They're not like us," Damu had replied.

"You don't have to be friends with them," she said, her gaze steady. "All you need is to know them. A leader knows his men."

By the fifth day, he had taken her advice. He learned their names, called them by them, and gave orders as he had seen his father do—confidently, without hesitation. He found himself watching them more closely, studying

their faces, their movements. Slowly, the distance between them began to close, but still, he felt the weight of their scrutiny, as if they were waiting for him to prove himself.

The first test came at Green Rock Village.

They had arrived to find the Frogeaters entrenched, a small group of them who were more than mere raiders. These were cannibals, and they had been feasting on the villagers for days. Bones and blood littered the ground, the stench of death thick in the air. Cages lined the outskirts of the village, holding the few survivors—half-starved, trembling, their eyes hollow.

Damu's stomach turned at the sight, but there was no time for hesitation. He gave the order to attack, and his men charged into the fray. The Frogeaters fought like cornered animals, their screams wild and guttural, their blades glinting red in the fading light.

The battle was short but brutal. Damu's army prevailed, saving the survivors, but at a cost. Tuntu, Magaya, and Yukho—three of his own men—lay dead by the end of it. Their bodies were carried to the edge of the village, where Damu ordered them buried. He stood silent as the graves were dug, the earth heavy and dark, and when the last mound of soil was packed, he knelt and placed his hand on the ground.

"They fought with honor," he said, his voice low but steady. "And we will honor them."

The next morning, they marched again, leaving the broken village behind.

Their mission was clear: cut off the Frogeaters' supply lines and buy time for Zahur's larger army to march north. For months, the Frogeaters had ravaged the northwestern reaches of Ramshorn—farms burned, villages slaughtered, fishing communities wiped away. They had moved like shadows across the land, leaving terror and ruin in their wake. Zahur's forces, stretched thin and unable to suppress the uprising, had tasked Damu and his men with the impossible: to sever the Frogeaters' arteries, restore hope to the broken people, and bring peace to a land that had known only fear.

Now, as they ventured deeper into the unforgiving terrain of Mendefera, the weight of that responsibility bore down on them. Damu felt it most of all. His father's words echoed in his mind: "Their victory is your victory. Their failures are your failure." He clenched the hilt of his sword and stared into the endless forest ahead, where the Frogeaters waited.

As Damu gazed down at the village below, his heart pounded with the weight of what was to come. Smoke drifted lazily from the cluster of thatched huts, a deceptive calm masking the horrors that lay ahead. He steeled himself for battle, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Memories of Rhoko's training yard came rushing back, flooding his mind with clarity and purpose.

"A true warrior's strength lies not in his sword, but in his heart," Rhoko's words echoed, cutting through his doubts like a blade.

Damu could almost feel the heat of the training yard, the sun bearing down on him as the clash of steel on steel

rang in his ears. He saw Rhoko's piercing gaze, his master's sword flashing in the sunlight as their movements danced together in a symphony of combat. The lessons were etched into his memory like carvings in stone. Stance: feet shoulder-width apart, center of gravity low. Grip: hold the sword high, elbows loose, dominant hand forward. Strike: precise, fluid, decisive.

"Focus on your center," Rhoko had whispered, his voice steady and unrelenting. "Anticipate, adapt, and strike when the moment is ripe."

Damu remembered how he had stumbled at first, overwhelmed by the relentless pace of Rhoko's strikes, but each failure sharpened him, tempered him like a blade forged in fire. In his mind's eye, he relived those moments—dodging, parrying, countering with growing confidence. The hours in the yard had been grueling, but they had built him into what he was now: a warrior.

The memories ignited something deep within him, a fire he thought might have flickered under the weight of fear. His grip on his sword tightened, resolve solidifying in his chest. He knew he was ready. He had to be. The Frogeaters waited below, brutal and unyielding, but he carried the lessons of his master at arms within him. Rhoko's wisdom burned in his mind: "Fight with heart."

He could almost hear Rhoko's voice again, from the day he had left Ramshorn behind. "The battlefield is unforgiving. Strategy and skill will serve you well, but don't underestimate the Frogeaters' ferocity."

“I won’t,” Damu had replied, standing tall before the gates of Ramshorn. “I will win this battle for Father. I will make him proud. I’ll make you proud, Master.”

That promise echoed in his heart now as he stood on the cusp of war. The scent of fresh leather still clung to his sword’s scabbard, a reminder of how new his role as a commander felt. Yet despite the weight of his doubts, Damu knew he could not falter. With a deep breath, he turned toward his men, ready to lead them forward.

Reality tugged at him sharply, pulling him from his thoughts. His men were waiting, their eyes on him, their fates tied to his decisions. Behind him, footsteps approached softly, breaking the stillness.

It was Tails. The youngest of his barefooted warriors, no older than fourteen, carried himself with the wary grace of someone who had grown up too fast. His bow hung lightly in his hand, though his knuckles whitened around the grip. Despite his youth, Tails had already proven himself a prodigy with the bow, his aim as steady as the rising sun. But now, the boy’s confidence seemed shaken.

“They’re down there,” Tails said, his voice taut with worry. “The Frogeaters. I counted at least five times our number.”

Damu turned to him, meeting his wide, searching eyes. For a moment, the boy looked small, swallowed by the enormity of what they faced. His words hung in the air like a blade poised to fall.

Five times our number.

The odds twisted like a knife in Damu’s chest, but he kept his face calm. He knew his men would be watching him, measuring their own courage against his.

“How many archers?” Damu asked, his voice low but steady.

Tails hesitated, his fingers tightening on his bow. “Fewer than us,” he said after a moment. “But their spearmen… there’s too many.”

Damu nodded, his mind racing. He turned back toward the village, scanning the horizon for any signs of weakness in the Frogeaters’ defenses. His heartbeat quickened, but he forced himself to think, to focus. The lessons of Rhoko whispered to him again: “Anticipate, adapt, and strike when the moment is ripe.”

“We’ve faced worse odds before,” Damu said finally, his voice firm. He placed a hand on Tails’ shoulder. The boy flinched slightly, then steadied under the weight of Damu’s grip. “Go back and ready the others. Tell them to string their bows and stay low. We’ll move when the light starts to fade.”

Tails hesitated, his youthful fear still evident, but he nodded and hurried back to the others. Damu watched him go, his heart heavy.

He had spoken with confidence, but the truth clawed at the edges of his mind. Five times their number. These were odds that even his father’s most seasoned generals would balk at. And yet here he was, leading men into what could easily be their deaths.

For a moment, doubt threatened to consume him. What if I fail them? But then he thought of his father's words: "Their victory is your victory. Their failures are your failure."

Damu exhaled slowly, centering himself. He thought of the fifteen barefooted warriors who had followed him so loyally, and of the three hundred soldiers who now marched under his command. He thought of the people in the villages who were counting on him, praying for salvation.

There was no room for fear. Only heart.

Damu's grip tightened on his sword. The Frogeaters would soon know the name Damu of Ramshorn.

For a moment, Damu didn't respond. His gaze remained fixed on the burning village below, its faint outlines barely visible beneath the canopy of trees. The flickering orange glow clawed at the darkening sky, a cruel reminder of the Frogeaters' destruction. He thought of the countless battles fought on these lands, of boys younger than Tails who had fallen with spears in their backs. Once, he'd seen a boy die clutching a reed flute, his fingers frozen as if to play a final note. The memory stung like an old wound, and a sigh escaped his lips, heavy with the weight of it all.

"They outnumber us, yes," Damu said finally, his voice calm and deliberate. "But numbers mean little when their kind knows no discipline." He turned to Tails, the edge in his voice softening for a moment. "What do the Frogeaters have, Tails? No laws. No honor. Not even the decency to stand by their own blood. They'll turn on each

other the moment the tide shifts. And when they do, we'll make sure they fall—like rats fleeing a burning hut."

Tails blinked, his knuckles still white around his bow, but Damu's words found their mark. The boy squared his shoulders and straightened, his jaw setting with renewed determination. "What's the plan, then?"

Damu allowed himself a faint smile. "We'll use the ridge and the wind. It favors us." He pointed toward the forest edge, where the slope angled downward into the village and the wind carried through the trees. "Our archers will hit their front lines before they even know we're here. And when they charge at us—angry, desperate, scattered—we'll already be waiting. We'll strike hard, strike fast, and they'll break."

Tails nodded, his grip on his bow steadying. "Just say the word."

Damu clapped the boy on the shoulder and strode back toward the others. Tails fell into step behind him, his footsteps lighter, his expression steadier.

The barefooted warriors stood in a loose semicircle, their bare feet planted firmly in the dirt, their weapons ready. To an outsider, they might have seemed ragged—a band of orphans and wanderers—but Damu knew better. These were not just men and women. They were survivors. Each of them bore the strength of iron forged in fire. They had lost everything once. Now, they had everything to fight for.

Fish-neck, a wiry veteran with a spear slung casually over one shoulder, grunted as Damu approached. “What’s the plan, boss? Another one of your crazy ideas, I’ll bet.”

Monkeyface snorted, his crooked tongue giving his words a slurred edge. “Better be a good one. Don’t suppose the wind’ll lend us a spear or two, eh?”

A ripple of laughter passed through the group, tension breaking like the first crack of dawn. Even Towila, the towering Dinka warrior who rarely spoke, let out a low rumble of amusement as he leaned on his double-edged axe.

Damu came to a stop in front of them, his eyes sweeping across their faces. Betho, once a dancer, now a blade whose movements flowed like deadly rhythm. Bahati, calm and steady, his broad chest rising and falling in sync with the deep rhythm of his breath. Nneoma, the healer, crouched beside Ali, the tracker, whose head tilted slightly toward the distant cries of the village, always listening.

The others—Chacha, Kofi, Jengo, Uche, Chido, and Tails—stood silently, their eyes fixed on him. These were not just comrades. They were family, bound not by blood but by survival, by the unspoken promise to fight for one another until the end.

Damu met each of their gazes, his voice calm but resolute. “The Frogeaters think they’re predators, that they can take what they want and leave us cowering. They don’t see us coming. Tonight, we remind them what it feels like to be hunted.”

The group straightened, their weapons at the ready. The joking had stopped, replaced by sharp, focused silence. Even Monkeyface wore a grim expression now, his crooked grin gone.

Damu turned toward the ridge, where the wind rippled through the trees and carried the scent of smoke. He drew his sword, the steel glinting in the dying light. The time for planning was over. The Frogeaters waited below, unaware of what was coming.

Damu raised his blade, his voice cutting through the air like a war drum. “Archers to the ridge. Spears at the ready. We move as one.”

The barefooted warriors fell into formation, their ragged appearance belying the disciplined unity that had been forged through hardship. Behind them, the three hundred soldiers shifted, the faint clatter of armor filling the air as they awaited his signal.

Damu took one last look at the burning village below, then turned his back to it. “Tonight,” he said quietly, “we fight with heart.”

And with that, they began their descent.

“This is Azania,” Damu said. His voice cut through the murmuring wind, steady and low. “Our land. Our home. We protect it, no matter the cost. The Frogeaters think they can take it from us, but they don’t know what it means to stand together. That is our strength. And tonight, we’ll remind them.”

He turned, pointing down toward the burning village. “Ali, take Nneoma and scout the far side of the ridge. I

want to know if their rear line is exposed. Tails, you and Betho set up here. I want their front line softened before we make our move. Fish-neck, Towila—get ready to flank. When we strike, we hit fast and hard.”

The warriors nodded, their eyes bright with resolve. Even Monkeyface, who always carried a crooked grin or a quick joke, was silent now as he gripped his spear. His knuckles whitened around the shaft.

He’s scared, Damu thought. Everyone is scared.

But fear was no stranger to him, nor to his men. They carried it with them like an old wound—felt its sting, acknowledged its presence, then pushed it aside. Fear was the price of survival, and survival was all they had left.

Damu’s gaze lingered on Monkeyface for a moment longer, and a memory surfaced, unbidden, from a time when the world seemed simpler.

It was years ago, in the bustling, overpopulated streets of Darfur Town, south of Azania. Damu had gone to attend one of the chieftain’s infamous tourneys—a bloody spectacle held to celebrate the marriage of the chieftain to his eighth wife, as he had for each of the seven before her. The air reeked of sweat, roasted meat, and damp earth, and the laughter of drunken men echoed through the crowded streets.

Before the tourney began, Damu had found himself among a group of young men sitting on a crooked bench outside the Golden Sorghum, a pleasure house notorious for its patrons and gossip. Monkeyface had been there,

tossing a withered guava from hand to hand, his crooked grin as sharp as a blade.

“Lions,” Monkeyface said, his voice laced with a mix of humor and longing. He tossed the guava into the air and caught it again, the fruit spinning lazily in his palm. “I’ve heard of a man who rode a lion into battle. Wouldn’t that be a sight?”

“Throw the guava,” urged Tails, the Fezzan youth sitting cross-legged nearby. He pulled an arrow from his quiver and nocked it to his bowstring with practiced ease. “Let’s see if I can hit it before it lands. And as for lions, I’d pay to see one of you ride one. Perhaps I’ll write a ballad about it.”

Tails was the youngest of them, a wiry boy no more than fourteen, still three years shy of manhood. Despite his youth, he carried himself with the confidence of someone who knew his worth. His skill with the bow made him the envy of every other boy in Darfur, and even the girls stole glances at him whenever he passed.

Monkeyface shifted restlessly on the bench, his eyes flicking toward the shuttered window above them. From inside the Golden Sorghum came the faint sound of laughter—a woman’s, soft and lilting, mingled with the deeper murmur of a man’s voice. Akile, the oldest of the serving women, was entertaining a guest. At fifty, her beauty was fading, but she still carried herself with a certain charm.

Her daughter, Mille, was another matter entirely. Sixteen and freshly flowered, Mille’s beauty had drawn the attention of half the town. Monkeyface was no

exception. He had decided she would be his, no matter the cost.

By the morrow, he planned to steal her away—to take her across the Black River to one of the distant towns where no one would know they had fled. He would fight anyone who stood in his way, even if it meant entering the chieftain's bloody tourney to win her.

"You'll never have her if you fight in the chieftain's tourney," Nswadi of Zulu said, leaning lazily against the doorway. His voice dripped with disdain, and the tin, lead, and copper trinkets around his neck clinked softly as he shifted. Like most Zulu warriors, Nswadi carried himself with an arrogance that bordered on insult.

"And why is that?" Monkeyface shot back, his crooked grin faltering.

"Because you'll be too dead to enjoy her," Nswadi said with a smirk.

"Throw the guava," Tails urged again, his bowstring taut. His youthful energy seemed to buzz in the air around him, like a hummingbird just shy of taking flight. Damu had noticed how Mille's gaze often lingered on the Fezzan youth when she brought him wine. Monkeyface had noticed too.

"There has never been a man to ride a lion into battle," Nswadi said, crossing his arms.

"Chiku would call him a liar," Damu thought with a wry smile, hearing his sister's sharp voice echo in his mind.

"The guava," Damu said aloud, tilting his head at Monkeyface. "Unless you mean to eat it."

Monkeyface scowled, then gave a short hop, dragging his clubfoot as he turned. With a grunt, he whipped the guava sidearm into the mist that hung above the river. It spun end over end, rising higher and higher into the gray void.

It hadn’t even reached its peak when Tails let his arrow fly. The yard-long shaft of golden wood, fletched with scarlet feathers, whistled after the guava. Damu didn’t see the arrow hit, but he heard it—a soft thunk that echoed across the water, followed by a faint splash.

Damu let out a low whistle. “You cored it. Sweet.”

Tails lowered his bow, a satisfied smirk tugging at his lips. Monkeyface shrugged, trying to mask his irritation, but Damu caught the glint of jealousy in his eye.

“Not half as sweet as Mille,” Monkeyface thought bitterly. He loved everything about her: her hazel eyes, the dimples in her cheeks, even the way her hair curled behind her ears. She smiled at everyone, but to him, it felt special. One night, she’d let him rub her feet and spin a silly tale for each toe, laughing softly the whole time—but only after he’d paid her with every coin he’d saved for months.

Damu chuckled to himself, remembering how close Monkeyface had come to losing everything to the coin lenders. If it hadn’t been for Damu and Tails, Monkeyface would’ve been sold into slavery to repay the debt. Joining Damu in the chieftain’s tourney had been the only way to get the lenders to forgive him, though it came with one condition: Monkeyface could never set foot in Darfur again.

Now, as they moved into position, they did so with the quiet efficiency of a pride of lions.

Damu lingered a moment longer, his gaze drifting back toward the village. The acrid scent of smoke stung his nostrils, carried by the wind. Below, the screams rose and fell like the distant roar of waves.

“Azania,” he murmured, tightening his grip on the hilt of his sword. “We protect it, no matter the cost.”

When he finally turned, the warriors were already moving, their footsteps as soft as whispers on the windswept hill. Tails, the youngest of them all, flitted ahead like a shadow eager to prove itself. Monkeyface followed, his heavy step dragging slightly behind the others. Together, they descended toward the village, a dark cloud of vengeance rolling down the hill.

The screams grew louder. Damu’s jaw tightened. There would be blood tonight.

Damu raised his sword, the cries of the burning village filling the air behind him. ‘Tonight, we fight with heart,’ he said. And as they began their descent, the first shadow of a Frogeater scout appeared at the edge of the ridge.

CHAPTER THREE

ZAHUR

The wind in the Foggy Lands carried a bitter chill, thick with the scent of damp earth and rot. Tendrils of mist coiled low over the muddy ground, clinging to the boots

of Zahur’s men as they trudged through the boggy expanse. The towering black trees of the swamp loomed like silent sentinels, their gnarled roots snaking into the muck. Somewhere in the distance, a faint splash echoed—perhaps the ripple of a predator slipping into the murky waters, or the tread of an unseen enemy.

Zahur stood still for a moment, his gaze scanning the dense wall of mist ahead. His armor, once polished and gleaming, was now dulled by the grime of the endless campaign. The golden trim that marked him as a chieftain glinted faintly in the weak, watery light that filtered through the fog. Around him, his soldiers moved cautiously, their eyes sharp, their hands never straying far from their weapons.

For months, they had been locked in this relentless struggle, chasing shadows through the Frogeaters’ homeland. The Foggy Lands were as treacherous as their inhabitants—mud that sucked at a man’s boots, trees that concealed countless ambushes, and the constant hum of unseen creatures lurking just out of sight. The Frogeaters knew these lands like the backs of their scarred hands, using the terrain to their advantage at every turn.

Zahur had never seen an enemy so cunning, so elusive. Victory seemed to slip further from his grasp with each passing day. Every time they drove the Frogeaters back, the tribe melted into the swamp like smoke, only to strike again in the dead of night or the shrouded hours of dawn.

And yet, even here, in the heart of enemy territory, Zahur’s thoughts were not on the battle ahead. They lingered instead on his son.

Damu.

The name rose unbidden to Zahur’s mind, bringing with it a swell of emotion that he struggled to suppress. He had not seen his son in months, not since the day Damu had ridden north with his fifteen barefooted warriors and the three hundred soldiers entrusted to him. Zahur had sent him into the fire, burdened with a task that would have tested even the most seasoned generals. At the time, he had felt more fear than pride—fear that he had pushed his son too soon, that he was sending a boy to do a man’s work.

But the reports had come, one by one, like rays of sunlight piercing a stormy sky.

First, the news of Green Rock Village. The Frogeaters entrenched there had been wiped out, their supply lines severed, the surviving villagers freed. Damu had not only commanded the attack but led the charge himself, his barefooted warriors striking with the precision and ferocity of lions.

Then came word of the ambush at Two Rivers Crossing. Damu’s forces had been outnumbered three to one, but he had turned the tide with cunning and daring, using the terrain to lure the Frogeaters into a trap. By the time Zahur’s scouts arrived to assess the aftermath, the battlefield was littered with Frogeater dead, and Damu’s soldiers were tending to their wounded with grim efficiency.

And most recently, the liberation of Ironclad Hill. It was said that Damu had scaled the hill himself in the dead of night, taking out the Frogeater sentries with nothing but a dagger before signaling his men to storm the stronghold. The victory had shattered a key Frogeater hold in the northern riverlands, forcing the enemy to retreat further into their territory.

Damu of Ramshorn.

The name was already spreading, carried on the tongues of soldiers and villagers alike. They spoke of him as if he were a hero from the old tales—a warrior of unyielding courage, a leader who fought not from the safety of the rear lines but at the forefront, alongside his men.

Zahur felt a pang of regret. He had never doubted Damu's strength or his skill—those had been clear from the boy's earliest days in the dueling arenas. But he had doubted his readiness, his maturity. He had doubted his heart.

Now, hearing of Damu's victories, Zahur knew he had been wrong.

"Father, let me prove myself." Zahur could still hear the words Damu had spoken in the great hall of Ramshorn Castle, his voice steady but tinged with the fiery determination of youth. At the time, Zahur had seen only the boy standing before him, not the man he would become. He had agreed to Damu's request, not out of faith, but because he had seen no other choice.

And yet, Damu had risen to the challenge. He had faced the Frogeaters not with fear, but with courage and cunning. He had not only survived—he had triumphed.

Zahur's chest swelled with pride, though he did not show it. Outwardly, he remained the same stoic leader his men had always known, his expression as impenetrable as the fog around them. But inside, he marveled at the man his son had become.

He thought of Damu standing on a hill, his sword in hand, the fire of resolve in his eyes. He imagined him rallying his barefooted warriors, their ragged band uniting under his command to face impossible odds. He imagined him raising the banner of Azania high, a symbol of hope for the scattered and the broken.

In his heart, Zahur knew that Damu's victories were not merely his own—they were victories for all of Azania. Every battle won, every village saved, was a step closer to reclaiming their land from the Frogeaters' grasp.

The fear Zahur had carried for so long—the fear of losing his son to war, of seeing him swallowed by the same horrors that had claimed so many others—had not disappeared entirely. But it had been joined by something stronger.

Pride.

"Chieftain," a voice broke through Zahur's thoughts, pulling him back to the present. It was Rhoko, his trusted lieutenant and Damu's former instructor. The older man stood at his side, his scarred face set in a grim

expression. “The scouts have returned. They’ve found something.”

Zahur nodded, the weight of the moment settling over him once more. The Frogeaters’ leader was somewhere in these cursed swamps, and finding him was the key to ending this war. But as he turned to follow Rhoko, his thoughts lingered on Damu one last time.

“Perhaps,” he thought, “the boy has surpassed the man.”

The fog swirled around him as he moved forward, his boots sinking into the soft earth. Behind him, his men followed, their armor clinking softly in the oppressive silence of the swamp. The battle ahead would be brutal, but Zahur carried a quiet hope within him now—hope born of a father’s pride, and the knowledge that his son was out there, fighting for the same dream.

Azania would endure.

A chilly night enveloped the area. Under the cloak of darkness, a scout emerged from the Foggy grass on horseback, approaching a group of men huddled around a small fire.

“Chieftain Zahur?” the scout rasped, urgency roughening his voice. Eyes darted towards the lone figure cloaked in shadow by the tent flap.

Inside, the flickering fire cast grotesque shapes on the hunched forms huddled around it. Damu, a young warrior, his face marked with two swords crossed. He refilled horn cups with Kivuvu wine, his movements jerky and tense. The scout stumbled in, his ragged breaths disrupting the silence.

“Chieftain Zahur,” he gasped, “the frogmen’s nest.”

“Where?” Zahur snapped, a weary rasp in his voice.

“Black Mountain tunnels.” The scout’s words hung heavy in the air. Despair, thick and suffocating, settled on Zahur’s shoulders. He dismissed the scout with a curt nod.

“A death trap,” one of the chiefs muttered, his voice laced with dread. Months of relentless fighting had bled the life from their camp. Desertion thinned their ranks, and weariness gnawed at the remaining men. Zahur himself felt the burden of responsibility pressing down on him. He couldn’t abandon the defenseless far North to these merciless frogeaters.

Damu strained to catch the hushed conversation, his unease growing with every muttered word. Buku son of Buku, one of the few remaining sons, gnawed on a stale ration, his youthful bravado a mask for his fear. Firelight flickered wildly on the tent walls, mimicking the turmoil within Zahur.

“Invisible archers haunt those smoking rocks,” another elder rasped. “Ghosts, they call them. This is their land, Chieftain. We could be fighting shadows for years.”

“Not a man,” Buku son of Buku chimed in, his voice barely a whisper. “Shapeshifter, they say. A woman sometimes. No one’s seen his true face. He vanishes like smoke.”

Zahur slammed a fist on the map, the sound echoing in the tense silence. He snatched another, his brow furrowed in frustration. Damu watched, his heart

hammering against his ribs. All eyes were on Zahur, desperate for a lifeline.

“We don’t need a thousand to die,” Damu finally broke the silence, his voice hoarse. “A small group could enter the tunnels, sniff out this… creature.”

Zahur’s gaze pinned him like a predator. “How?”

Damu swallowed, his throat dry. “They expect a grand assault, a show of force. Not a dozen men slipping through the night. My men and I can flush him out, Chieftain.”

A tense silence stretched, broken only by the crackling fire. The mushroom clan chief spoke, his voice gravelly. “A gamble, but perhaps our only one.”

That night, as Damu and his men vanished into the darkness of the Black Mountain tunnels, a knot of dread tightened in Zahur’s gut. He had commanded his men to rouse him with the first sign of trouble – anything amiss on the smoking mountain during the Hour of the Ox. Now, the designated hour loomed closer, each tick of the clock a hammer blow against his already frayed nerves.

Zahur and his remaining men had relocated to the riverbank, offering a clear view of the mountain and its gaping tunnel entrances. Three agonizing days had crawled by since Damu’s departure, each sunrise bringing a renewed surge of worry. Captured? Dead? Zahur pushed the thoughts away with a snarl. “He cannot die,” he muttered, a fierce possessiveness coloring his voice. “He is a son of the gods.”

Restlessness gnawed at him. He paced outside his tent, the cool night air offering little solace. The moon, a pale sliver in the inky sky, cast an ethereal glow upon the churning river. A fleeting cloud drifted across its face, plunging the world into momentary darkness. In that suffocating blackness, Zahur could almost hear the screams, the clash of steel, the symphony of death playing out on the mountainside.

Damu had taken a small force with him, a diversion to create an opening for his men to infiltrate the tunnels. Now, the mountain responded with a terrifying spectacle. A storm of fiery arrows rained down, each streak a fleeting comet against the dark canvas of the night. From afar, it was an oddly beautiful display, a macabre dance of fire and death. But Zahur saw only the danger, his heart twisting with each fiery arc.

“Only one,” he thought, his voice a choked whisper. “Only one arrow for my son to fall.”

He watched, his vision blurring, as a figure on the mountainside was pierced through a dozen times. The man, a human torch, writhed and spun before collapsing in a heap of smoldering rags. “Damu?” The question tore from Zahur’s throat, raw and desperate. But the distance offered no answer, only the cacophony of battle.

The clash of steel died down, replaced by an eerie silence. The fires sputtered and faded, leaving behind an unsettling quiet. The moon emerged from its cloud shroud, bathing the battlefield in an ethereal light. Zahur stared, his gaze fixed on the mountain, a silent plea hanging heavy in the air.

“If they don’t attack tonight,” he rasped, his voice laced with a steely resolve, “we go in at dawn. Even if it means walking into our deaths.” With that, he turned and entered his tent, the weight of his decision settling upon him like a leaden cloak.

The reminder, “He is a son of the gods,” echoed in his mind. It was a truth Zahur clung to, a desperate hope battling the tide of his fear. But a sliver of unease wormed its way in. What did it truly mean to be a son of the gods? Was Damu destined for a glorious fate, or something more…uncertain? The answer, like the fate of his son, remained shrouded in the darkness of the mountain tunnels.

They had retreated from the Valley of Death, where the enemy’s arrows couldn’t reach them. Relief washed over Zahur as a soldier informed him, “Your son, my lord, he went through the tunnels.” A tense silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the rasp of worried breaths and the clinking of armor. Zahur’s grip tightened on his spear, his gaze fixed on the dark maw of the tunnels. Every passing moment stretched into an eternity, each heartbeat a hammer blow against his ribs.

“Shield wall!” Zahur barked, his voice hoarse with suppressed anxiety. The remaining men sprang into action, forming a near-impenetrable barrier of overlapping shields. Archers nervously nocked their arrows, their eyes flitting between the tunnel entrance and the smoldering battlefield above. The air reeked of burnt flesh and fear.

Minutes bled into an agonizing hour. Zahur watched, his heart a drum against his ribs, as his already depleted force dwindled further. A young warrior crumpled to the ground, an arrow protruding from his chest. A strangled cry tore from Zahur's throat, but discipline held him back. He couldn't afford to panic, not now. Not when Damu's life hung in the balance.

Then, a flicker of movement in the darkness. A figure emerged, staggering slightly, from the tunnel mouth. A collective gasp rose from the remaining men. Damu. But it was a Damu they barely recognized. His armor was a grotesque tapestry of dried blood, his face streaked with grime and sweat. In one hand, he clutched a severed head, the lifeless eyes staring sightlessly into the distance. The sight sent the remaining enemy soldiers fleeing in terror.

"A man after all," Damu rasped, his voice barely audible over the pounding in Zahur's ears. He stumbled forward, collapsing at his father's feet as the head of the frogmen chieftain rolled away with a sickening thud. The tension shattered, replaced by a wave of exhilaration. Cheers erupted from the battered ranks, a ragged chorus of triumph echoing through the valley.

Zahur, his heart lighter than it had been in months, knew he would soon return home to his beloved Belkis.

There was a grand feast at the keep of Zinder, open to the entire town. Damu reveled with his men in the tavern when Zahur's guard arrived.

"Kojo," Damu called out, wiping froth from his lips, "come join us! I'm sure my father's feast bores you."

Kojo, Zahur's most trusted guard, eyed the brimming tankard of wine. "The finest Zanzibari, I hear," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Perhaps another time. The Chieftain requests your presence."

Damu excused himself and headed towards the hall, where a celebratory banquet was in full swing. He found his father seated at the head table with his elders, a lone figure amidst the boisterous crowd.

"Are you well, Father?" Damu inquired, noticing the untouched food on Zahur's plate.

Zahur chuckled, a weak sound. "Just a touch too much Goria wine, I fear. Strong stuff, that."

"Or perhaps old age catching up to you?" Damu teased, a playful glint in his eyes.

Zahur joined in the laughter, the tension easing from his shoulders. "You've proven yourself a true Moran warrior in these past months, Damu."

"Just fighting to win, Father, as Rhoko taught me." Damu turned to his old mentor, who stood nearby.

Rhoko inclined his head. "You fought valiantly, my boy. You've earned my respect."

Zahur turned serious, his gaze hardening. "I grow old, Damu. My bones creak with every passing day." He gestured towards a magnificent sword lying on the table. "This is Khabaa, passed down through generations in our family. It's time it found a new wielder."

"But Father," Damu protested, "Hami is next in line. By right, the sword is his."

Zahur shook his head. “Khabaa chooses its wielder, Damu. It’s a warrior’s blade, not meant for a politician’s hand. You have the heart of a soldier, Damu. Now, kneel.”

This is your sword, I was only holding it for you. He thought of the words coming out of his mouth.

The news had traveled like wildfire across the lands – the frogmen were vanquished. On their journey back to Khanduus, the smallfolk lined the roads and town squares, their cheers a balm to Zahur’s weary soul. The tall, graceful ladies of Shilluk showered him with fragrant flowers, adorning both him and his horse in a vibrant display of gratitude.

With each passing mile, his heart ached with a different kind of longing. Seven months. Seven long months since he’d last felt the warmth of his wife, Belkis, beside him. The memory of her laughter, the caress of her touch, sent a familiar shiver down his spine. “Oh, Belkis,” he murmured, a smile tugging at his lips. “How I’ve missed the taste of your honeyed words, the fire in your eyes.”

They crossed the churning Black River, leaving behind the verdant town where his men had pleaded with him to rest. “You can stay,” he’d told them, his voice firm yet laced with a touch of impatience. “But I must go to my woman.”

Damu, ever the dutiful son, had offered, “I will bring you home, Father.”

The journey back was filled with conversations, a desperate attempt to bridge the chasm the war had

created. As they rested by a tranquil stream, Zahur met Damu's gaze, a startling reflection of deceased Khushanis queen staring back at him. "You have your mother's eyes," he said, a bittersweet pang in his chest.

Damu's smile mirrored his own. "I've been meaning to ask, Father," he began, his voice hesitant, "about my mother. Is she... alive?"

Zahur felt a sudden coldness grip his heart, a stark contrast to the warmth of his thoughts moments before. "Your mother," he started, his voice thick with a sudden, unwelcome emotion, "she died a long time ago. When you two were just babes. I will never forget her beauty, her hair like spun moonlight." He forced a smile, but it felt hollow, brittle even. "We should get going," he said, his voice strained. "Belkis waits."

Zahur trudged up the hill, the vast landscape stretching before him like a mocking reminder of the lie that weighed heavily on his soul. "Gods forgive me," he muttered, his voice ragged. "But it was for his own good. My job is to protect him, and the truth… the truth could shatter him."

His mind flickered back twenty years, to the day Damu was born amidst the chaos of Kirua. The Khushani prince, fueled by a thirst for vengeance and a misplaced sense of entitlement, had rallied a ragtag army. Pirates, poachers, and scattered clans – a desperate bid to avenge the brutal murder of his family.

Zahur's army had crushed the rebellion within a week. The prince lay dead at Tombs Bay, another victim of the merciless fish folk. But the victory tasted like ash in

Zahur’s mouth. A storm, unlike any he’d ever witnessed, had lashed at Kirua the night the prince fell. Driven by an inexplicable force, Zahur found himself drawn to the ancient shrine nestled in the blackwater mountains. His men pleaded with him, but he brushed them aside, compelled by an unseen hand.

“My lord,” one of them had called out, his voice barely audible over the howling wind, “it’s too cold out here!”

“Stay back,” Zahur had commanded, his voice surprisingly firm. “No one follows.”

The shrine was a monolithic structure, a testament to a forgotten era. Carved into the mountainside, it seemed to hold its breath, waiting. As Zahur approached, a massive stone door creaked open, revealing a figure unlike any he’d ever seen.

Despite his age, Darko stood before him, a force to be reckoned with. His steely gaze and the coiled tension in his posture hinted at a lifetime spent honing his fighting skills, a strength that went beyond mere physical power. He wore the colors of the old king’s guard, the unmistakable sigil of the Khushani gleaming in the flickering torchlight.

“Impossible,” Zahur gasped, a wave of terror washing over him. He drew his sword, its tip trembling in his hand.

The man chuckled, a deep rumble that echoed within the chamber. “No need for that, Zahur,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “Your blade won’t harm me.”

“You… you’re a Niss? I thought you were all…” Zahur faltered, the word “dead” catching in his throat.

“Not all,” Darko replied, his gaze unwavering. “She’s waiting for you inside.”

A tremor of unease ran down Zahur’s spine. “Who?” he managed to force out.

“I told you, you don’t need that sword,” Darko repeated, his voice laced with amusement. “It won’t save you here.”

With a gesture, the Niss pushed the heavy stone door wider open. Inside, bathed in the soft glow of torches, a tableau unfolded that left Zahur speechless. Handmaidens, their faces etched with sorrow, stood in a circle around a figure shrouded in white.

A weak voice, barely a whisper, pierced the silence. “Zahur… son of Taha.”

It was the young queen, presumed dead by drowning during the rebellion all those years ago. Her voice, frail but unmistakable, hung heavy in the air.

“Impossible,” Zahur choked out, his mind reeling. “If you survived the ocean’s fury, how can you still be alive?”

The queen, a wisp of her former self, recounted her harrowing escape from Al-kushan, the wrath of the warlord forcing her to flee. Her ship, she revealed, had been swallowed by the merciless waves of Benhaddou Bay.

“Do you believe in the gods, Taha?” she rasped, her voice barely audible over the dripping water from the cave ceiling.

“The old gods, yes,” Zahur replied, his voice thick with a strange mix of awe and apprehension.

“Then know this,” the queen continued, a flicker of defiance momentarily lighting up her sunken eyes. “The gods of the sea, in their infinite wisdom, granted me a second chance. Three days I spent at the bottom of the white sea, before they pulled me back from the clutches of oblivion. They kept me alive for a reason, a purpose I have served.”

A tremor ran through Zahur. This spectral queen, a living embodiment of death and rebirth, was entrusting him with a monumental task. The air grew thick with the scent of incense and decay, the handmaidens moving like silent ghosts around the veiled figure.

“Come closer, Taha,” the queen beckoned, her voice a mere whisper.

Steeling himself, Zahur approached the veiled figure. “Forgive my appearance,” she croaked, the sound like dry leaves rustling in the wind. “I am no longer the beauty they called me in Al-kushan.”

He peered through the veil, his breath catching in his throat. The queen was a grotesque caricature of her former self, her skin a sickly gray, her once vibrant eyes mere hollows. Yet, a spark of life still flickered within her.

“How can this be?” he thought, his mind reeling.

“It is time,” the queen rasped, her voice gaining a hint of strength.

The handmaidens drew back the veil, revealing a swollen belly, a stark contrast to the withered frame that encased it. A horrifying fascination gripped Zahur as he saw the life pulse beneath the translucent skin.

“I bear three children, Taha,” the queen rasped. “You will take a girl and a boy, raise them as your own. When the time comes, they will walk their own paths. You must never separate them, for they are destined to be bound by an unseen thread. Gye-Nyame and Akofena, their signs shall be.”

“And the third child?” Zahur managed to ask, the weight of her request settling upon him like a leaden cloak.

A flicker of sadness crossed the queen’s spectral face. “His path diverges,” she whispered. “His destiny is woven from a different thread.”

CHAPTER FOUR

CHIKU

The dawn was a masterpiece of color and renewal. The rain had washed away the grime and dirt, revealing a world bathed in a soft, ethereal light. The air was crisp and clean, filled with the promise of a new day.

In the distance, a majestic castle stood tall, its ancient stone walls shimmering in the morning sun. The castle was perched atop a hill, overlooking a vast expanse of rolling countryside. Lush green fields stretched out as

far as the eye could see, dotted with clusters of trees and winding paths. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of a majestic mountain range pierced the clear blue sky.

The sun was shining brightly, illuminating the clear blue sky above Azania Castle's eastern woods. The other kids were playing hide-and-seek, and Chiku was trying to shoot an arrow at a man made of grass and ropes. She closed one eye and aimed carefully, her curly hair adorned with braids and beads flowing behind her. Before she could shoot, the other kids bumped into her, causing her to miss. Frustrated, she chased after them, but soon gave up. "Stupid games," she said and walked into the dense forest.

Mbiyu, the son of a breastfeeder, saw Chiku dashing through the trees and followed her. He was ten years old, two years older than Chiku, but he was overweight and found it hard to keep up. He was Chiku's only friend, and he helped her climb his goats. Chiku could ride them a short distance before she fell off and bruised her ankles or the goat's face. Once, he asked her why she wanted to ride a goat instead of a pony, and she told him that a pony is not a lion. Mbiyu didn't understand what she meant and gave up.

"Where are we going, Chiku?" Mbiyu yelled, trying to catch his breath.

"Go back," Chiku yelled back as she walked through the thick grass, avoiding thorny trees. Her dress was held high for easy walking.

Mbiyu finally caught up to Chiku, who was looking at a trapped rabbit. Her face looked disappointed, but Mbiyu was excited for her.

“You caught a rabbit! Wow,” Mbiyu said with excitement. “But I don’t understand why you’re not happy.”

“I was hoping for a baby lion,” Chiku replied.

“A lion?” Mbiyu replied with concern. “There are no lions in these woods. You can have wolves and tigers, but not lions.”

“How do you know?” asked Chiku.

“My father is a hunter. He tells me things,” Mbiyu replied.

Chiku turned and started walking back the way they came.

“Aren’t you taking the rabbit?” asked Mbiyu.

“You can have it if you want,” Chiku replied.

The midday sun beat down on the courtyard of Azania Castle, turning the polished stone floor into a shimmering mirage. Inside the cool shade of the castle library, Chiku squirmed on a plush cushion, her bare feet dangling off the edge. Across from her, Akina, her half-sister, a slender girl of nineteen with eyes the color of deep emeralds, traced a delicate finger across the manuscript sprawled on her lap. Chiku, on the other hand, was struggling with a piece of fabric and a knitting needle.

“I hate knitting,” Chiku groaned, her voice filled with frustration.

Akina chuckled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “Patience, Chiku. Knitting is a skill that takes time to master.”

Chiku rolled her eyes, but she continued to poke at the fabric with the knitting needle. She had been trying to learn how to knit for weeks, but she just couldn’t get the hang of it. The yarn kept slipping off the needles, and her fingers felt clumsy and awkward.

“It’s so hard,” Chiku complained. “Why do we even need to know how to knit?”

Akina smiled. “Knitting is a valuable skill, Chiku. It can be used to make all sorts of things, from scarves and hats to blankets and sweaters. And it’s a great way to relax and unwind.”

Chiku wasn’t convinced. She much preferred spending her time exploring the castle grounds or playing with the other children. But Akina was determined to teach her how to knit, and she kept encouraging Chiku to keep trying.

A flicker of a smile showed on Akina’s lips. “You don’t like reading, you hate knitting, you hate singing and poetry. What is it you like that makes you a girl? What is it that you desire?”

“I want to be a warrior like father and Damu,” replied Chiku.

“You are a princess of Azania. You will one day marry a princeling from any powerful tribe around Alkebulan.

That is your job, and that prince will not need any warrior but a wife to give him princes and princesses," Akina said, her voice as smooth as honey.

"I will never be any prince's wife," Chiku smirked. "I will be a lion-riding warrior like Queen Nhakka in the books."

Akina shot her a knowing smile. "Okay, I hear you. But remember, the book also mentions Queen Nhakka's son. How do you suppose she got him?"

"I don't know…" Chiku replied.

"Exactly. Queen Nhakka married Prince Ndere, son of Mbanga and Kantu of the western province. Riding a lion and fighting in battle didn't stop her from becoming a mother, you hear me?"

Chiku nodded her head in approval, but the thought still lingered in her head as she awkwardly stared at the knitting needle.

"How come you never go hunting with father? How come it's only boys, not girls?" Chiku asked, changing the conversation.

Akina lingered at her, realizing that Chiku was serious and had probably thought about this for a long time.

"What can I say? It's Taha tradition," replied Akina. But she could see from Chiku's face that her explanation wasn't enough. Akina needed to provide more context. "We have always gone on gatherings, and none of the men come with us. Do you know why?"

Chiku shook her head from side to side.

“In our Taha tradition,” Akina explained, “men are primarily responsible for providing for the family through hunting, fishing, and farming. This is seen as a crucial role in ensuring the survival and well-being of the community. Women, on the other hand, are responsible for domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. This division of labor is deeply ingrained in our culture and has been passed down through generations.”

“Mbosso always comes with mother to the gatherings,” Chiku interrupted. “And now father deems him old enough to go hunting with him. Why can’t I go?” In the process of knitting, she hurt her finger with the needle and the blood oozed through the cloth.

“I told you to be careful,” Akina said, her voice filled with concern. “Put your finger in your mouth and swallow the blood.”

Chiku did as she was told, but her face remained clouded with disappointment.

Today was the day Zahur, the chieftain of Azania, and nearly every able-bodied man in the castle were embarking on the annual hunt and attending the conclave. The conclave was a gathering where Zahur would settle disputes among clan leaders and deliver verdicts on criminals, which often included the gruesome task of carrying out the executions himself.

Mbosso, the youngest son of Zahur and Belkis, was dressed in traditional hunting attire, including a loincloth made of boiled leather and a beaded necklace. He was also given a new bow and a sturdy pony to ride.

The pony was a small, agile animal well-suited for the rugged terrain of Azania.

Despite her fervent pleas and warrior spirit, Chiku was forbidden from participating in the ritual, which was a deeply ingrained tradition in Azania. The exclusion of girls from such events was rooted in the belief that they were not physically or mentally capable of handling the rigors of hunting and warfare.

Frustration bubbled within her. Every year, it was the same. Her brothers, Damu and Hami, were dragged to these hunting and executions to criminals, returning with hushed whispers and haunted eyes.

“It’s not fair,” Chiku muttered, kicking her feet against the smooth stone. “Just because I am a girl, doesn’t mean I can’t go hunting?”

The two were standing on the balcony, staring down at the compound. Chiku’s eyes were transfixed on the bow that Mbosso had slung over his back. “He doesn’t even know how to use that, I am tem times better than him.” Chiku said.

Akina turned to her, a flicker of concern in her eyes. “Chiku, it’s not about strength or bravery. The Azania tradition…”

“Tradition!” Chiku spat. “A tradition that keeps girls locked away like fragile dolls while the boys get to witness real life!”

Before Akina could respond, the heavy door behind them swung open, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered figure. Zahur stood framed by the entrance. His face, etched

with the harsh lines of a life spent safeguarding the Northern borders, softened when he saw his daughter's fiery defiance.

"Chiku," he said, his voice a deep rumble, "why the long face?"

Chiku bit her lip, torn between voicing her frustration and the ingrained respect for her father. Akina stepped forward, placing a hand on Chiku's shoulder.

"Father," Akina said, "Chiku is upset that she cannot accompany you to... the hunt."

Zahur knelt before his daughter, his gaze meeting her eyes. Chiku, for the first time, saw a flicker of doubt in his normally stern eyes. "Little one," he said, "the sight of taking a life can be... disturbing. It is not a game you pretend with wooden swords."

Chiku was at a loss for words. She didn't know how to respond. A long silence stretched between them. Finally, Zahur sighed. "Chiku, there are other ways to be brave. This tradition..."

"Bad tradition, outdated," Chiku interjected, "a relic of the past."

Zahur straightened, a flicker of anger sparking in his eyes. But before he could speak, a booming voice echoed through the halls of Azania.

"Chieftain!" a guard bellowed. "Your horse is ready!"

"We are not done here," Zahur said.

Chiku waited until the last trace of her father and brothers disappeared down the muddy track before

bolting out of the Azania compound. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a drumbeat urging her forward. Today, she wouldn’t be left behind.

Skirting the puddles that dotted the muddy courtyard after the recent downpour, Chiku darted between the training grounds and the stables, her bare feet squelching in the mud. She avoided the cluster of gossiping ladies near the well, their disapproval a familiar sting. Belkis Taha, Chiku’s mother, would not be happy if she found her daughter out gallivanting alone, especially towards the direction of the gruesome executions.

Chiku knew a shortcut through the thick undergrowth that fringed the Azania grounds. The path, barely a trail, was known only to a handful of adventurous children and the occasional stray cat. Thorns snagged at her clothes, but Chiku pressed on, the thrill of defiance a shield against the scratches and the growing distance.

After what felt like an eternity, she emerged from the undergrowth, her lungs burning. The sight that greeted her made her heart lurch. A clearing had been carved into the hillside, and in the center, a makeshift scaffold loomed, casting an ominous shadow over the gathering crowd. Zahur stood at the foot of the scaffold, his figure dwarfed by the imposing wooden structure. Even from this distance, Chiku could sense the tension coiling in the air. She had to get closer.

Rain-washed mud squelched between Chiku’s toes as she followed the trail behind the men. Thirty-five strong they were, or fifty a grim procession etched against the

bruised violet sky. Her eight-year-old legs burned with exertion, but she pressed on, fueled by a desperate need to prove herself.

Chiku wasn’t naive. She understood the gruesome purpose of their trek. Beheadings were a harsh reality in the North, a necessary evil to maintain order. But it wasn’t just the act itself that spurred her on; it was the desire to be seen as an equal. Her brothers, Damu and Hami, strode with a stoic acceptance that rankled Chiku. They were old enough, men in the eyes of their father and the Azania tradition and now Mbosso was one of them. Yet, she, brimming with courage and curiosity, was deemed unfit.

The path snaked through the foothills, the silence broken only by the rhythmic crunch of boots on mud and the labored gasps of the younger boys struggling to keep pace. Chiku, fueled by her mission, easily outpaced them. She wasn’t about to be left behind.

As they crested a low hill, the clearing came into view. A makeshift scaffold dominated the center, its dark silhouette stark against the bruised sky. Men milled about, their faces grim under the weight of the coming event. Chiku’s breath hitched. This was it. The place where her world, rigidly divided by tradition, might shift on its axis.

Relief washed over Chiku as Damu scooped her onto his horse’s back. She had ached to complain about being left behind, but a deep breath whooshed out of her instead, stolen by the sight before them.

A small holdfast nestled amidst the woods had been their destination, a grim contrast to the verdant scenery. In its clearing, a man stood bound, his back to a makeshift tether, awaiting his fate. Hami's murmur about the man being Mursi sent a shiver down Chiku's spine. Fairly tales spun by old Ramla echoed in her ears – bloodthirsty slavers, warlocks, stealing children in the night. But the man before her looked nothing like those terrifying figures. Young, gaunt, his fear a palpable presence even from afar.

"What's wrong with him?" Chiku whispered, the question tumbling out before she could stop it.

Damu, his brow furrowed, squeezed her arm gently. "Just scared, little one. That's all."

Marrakesh, dressed in emerald green like a Flameguard brother, but his Mursi warrior tattoos betrayed him. He stood shivering rain had lashed him all morning, and his breath mingled with the horse's, steaming in the cold air as Chieftain Zahur had his men cut him down from the tether. Damu sat tall and still on his horse, Chiku perched in front of him.

At eight, she tried to appear older, pretending to have seen it all before, even if only in stories.

A faint wind blew as Marrakesh was brought forward, muttering words like a madman in a language non of them could understand

"*Mtalaam,*" Commanded Zahur. An elderly woman stepped out of the crowd, bold head and markings in her face.

“I saw it, I saw Eloko!” she interpreted Marrakesh’s words. “They are coming for us all! We’re all going to die!”

“Eloko,” Zahur uttered.

“In Mursi, Eloko means nightdancer or devils, my Chieftain.”

In stories, Chiku had heard of the night dancers. Old Ramla had told them of a Supreme being who could create his own night that could last for eternity and turn man into his slave, he will wake the dead on his return. Remembering all this Chiku’s heart began pumping. “ death is coming” she whispered to herself.

Over their heads flapped the banners of the Tahas of Azania: a locust flying in the desert wind and the fisi of mendefera: a hyena on a dry land. Chiku’s father sat solemnly on his horse, his long white beard reaching his chest. His wrinkled forehead spoke of his age.

Questions were asked and answers given there in a mursi language and the translation of an old woman in that bright morning, but afterward Chiku could recall little of it. Finally, her father nodded to his men. Two of them dragged Marrakesh to the wooden stump in the center of the square, its surface slick with the blood of many.

“It’s time,” Chieftain Zahur said.

Slowly, Marrakesh rested his head on the hard black wood. Chieftain Zahur dismounted, and his son Hami brought forth the sword, “Nightmare.” Its blade was

khabaa steel, spell-forged and dark as night. Nothing held an edge like khabaa steel in the whole of Alkeblan.

Zahur took hold of Nightmare with both hands. “You invaded our lands, raped our daughters and killed our people. By the word of Zahur of the Hadza tribe, Chieftain of Azania and the North of Alkeblan, I sentence you to die.” He raised the great sword high above his head.

Chiku’s bastard brother, Damu, covered her eyes. “You don’t have to see this,” he whispered.

She pulled his hand away. “I want to see,” she said.

Her father took off Marrakesh’s head with a single sure stroke. Blood sprayed out across the dry grass. Chiku couldn’t take her eyes away from Marrakesh’s head and the blood streaming around the black stump.

A severed head bounced off a root and rolled to Hami’s feet. The young man, finding amusement in everything, laughed, kicked it away with his boot.

Chiku’s grip tightened on Damu’s hand, her fear a tangible weight in his chest. Damu steered the horse away, following their father.

Over the next three days, Chiku witnessed her father, Zahur, presiding over the conclave, where he settled disputes over land, animals, stolen wives, and broken promises among the clan leaders. These gatherings were a crucial part of Azanian society, ensuring the maintenance of peace and order within the community.

Damu and Hami had participated in the Orunja tourneys, a series of competitive events held annually between

young men from different tribes. These tourneys were not only a test of physical strength and skill but also a way for young men to prove themselves and earn the respect of their peers. Unfortunately, Damu had sustained a dislocated shoulder during one of the competitions.

The hunt had been a success, and Chiku had enjoyed eating more deer meat than the rest of her family. This was a testament to her growing hunting skills, which she had developed through observation and practice, despite being excluded from the official hunting ritual.

The ride back was hot, the wind unsettlingly dry, and the high sun seemed to mock the morning rain. Chiku rode ahead with her brother, her mind filled with Marrakesh’s words.

“Is it true what that man was saying, about the night dancer?” Chiku whispered, her voice trembling.

“A dying man’s words are as fickle as fear,” Damu replied. “Fear can make a man say anything to avoid a blade.”

“So he was lying?”

“Perhaps. But those who cross the wall to these lands only face death by the law of Alkebulan.”

Chiku pondered Damu’s words, her mind racing. She had always been fascinated by old Ramla's tales but the stories of the night dancer and his army of the dead and the doomed, terrified her much.

Night Dancer was a formidable creature, his pale, almost dark skin contrasting with his bold head and eyes that

glowed like embers. A supernatural being of immense power and mystery, he had been created by the ancient gods to serve as their protector against the evil god, Khuufu. As Old Ramla had recounted, after Khuufu was defeated, Night Dancer struggled to contain his newfound abilities. His unchecked power led to the tragic deaths of more gods, as well as the transformation of terrified people into his kind. He could even raise the dead, controlling them as fearsome wights. Chiku was filled with dread at the thought of becoming a Night Dancer herself, a fate she desperately sought to avoid.

Marrakesh, the mursi who was killed, had spoken of the Night Dancer's return.

But Damu's skepticism had planted a seed of doubt in Chiku's mind. Was the Night Dancer just a myth, a figment of people's imaginations? Or was there a grain of truth to the stories?

As they rode through the mountains of Saylac, Chiku glanced around at the familiar landscape. The trees seemed to sway in the wind, as if they were alive. The birdsong filled the air, a cheerful symphony that seemed to echo her own thoughts.

"Perhaps," Chiku thought, "this man was lying and there is no Night Dancer."

"The ancestral home of the Sankara clan, a towering structure that seemed to touch the sky, loomed ahead of them. Her father had planned to spend a night there before their return to Azania. The Sankara people, known for their warm hospitality, had received word of the Azanian Chieftain's upcoming visit and had prepared

accordingly. The clan chief and his household had eagerly awaited the esteemed guest. To Chiku's surprise, the Sankara people were significantly shorter than she was accustomed to.

'They are so small,' Chiku whispered to Damu, her voice barely audible over the rhythmic pounding of the horses' hooves.

'They are your father's subjects,' Damu replied, his tone firm yet gentle. 'You must treat them with respect.'

Chiku nodded, her gaze shifting to the distant horizon. As they drew closer to the Sankara clan's stronghold, she couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation and wonder. What kind of people would they be? How would they welcome them?"

Greetings were exchanged, and they were ushered into the heart of the Sankara clan's holdfast. A feast had been prepared, a testament to their hospitality. The air was thick with the mouthwatering aromas of roasted yams, their skins split open to reveal sweet, golden flesh. A steaming pot of pumpkin stew simmered on the hearth, its rich, orange broth fragrant with spices. A platter of roasted potatoes, their skins crisp and golden, was passed around, followed by a bowl of hearty black beans and another of tender yellow beans.

For the meat course, a succulent leg of sheep was brought out, its meat roasted to a perfect medium-rare. A pat of buttery gee, its golden color a testament to its rich flavor, was placed atop each serving. Chiku, her stomach growling in anticipation, couldn't resist reaching for a piece of the lamb. As she took a bite, the

tender meat melted on her tongue, a symphony of flavors dancing across her palate.

The stories they told were ones she'd never liked – endless boasts of their youthful exploits in war. Chiku was exhausted and, with Damu's help, retired to her chambers, where Mbosso was already asleep. She curled up under her furs beside him, her mind racing with worries.

What if the Mursi man was telling the truth? Had he truly seen the Night Dancer, and were they all doomed? She imagined herself transformed, her once familiar body twisted into a grotesque caricature. Her skin, once smooth and supple, would become cracked and leathery, her eyes glowing with an unnatural light. She would wander aimlessly, a creature of darkness, driven by an insatiable hunger.

Then, a different image surfaced. She saw herself as a rotting corpse, her bones exposed and her flesh consumed by worms. Yet, instead of fear, a strange sense of peace washed over her. In this imagined death, she would be free from the worries and anxieties of the living.

The thought brought a strange smile to her face. Perhaps, in the end, death was not so terrible after all.

She wondered if Mbosso was bothered at all. He hadn't said a word about the Mursi man or the Night Dancer, or anything else for that matter. He seemed completely unperturbed, sleeping soundly. Was he brave, or simply a stupid baby?

She found herself listening to the night. The wind did indeed sound like a wailing child, and from time to time she could hear men's voices, a horse's whinny, or a log crackling in the fire. But other than that, it was eerily quiet. The hour was late.

As she drifted off to sleep, Chiku couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. The silence was too profound, the night too still. Perhaps, she thought, the Mursi man's warnings were not mere tales, but a chilling prophecy.

CHAPTER FIVE

BELKIS

Belkis stood at the ramparts, a vision in sapphire and gold – the colors of her mother's clan, the Darod. Scented candles flickered within her chambers, casting a warm glow on the opulent furnishings of Azania all meticulously chosen to reflect her heritage. Blue and gold – a constant source of comfort, a reminder of home that transcended the vast distance between Azania and the Abyssinian lands of her birth.

Born an Amhara princess, Belkis possessed the regal bearing of her lineage. Yet, within her veins also flowed the fiery spirit of a Dahome warrior woman, a legacy passed down from a tribe known for riding lions across the vast Nile, but that was thousands and thousands of years ago. The Amharas, once a formidable force, had faded into legend with the rise of the gods. Whispers of a

lion-riding king, a descendant of the legendary Zagwe, still echoed in the stories Belkis held dear. Though the lions were said to be vanquished, a part of her, like her daughter Chiku, clung to the belief that these magnificent beasts still roamed free somewhere, waiting to be claimed by a worthy rider.

Belkis, tall and regal with her honey-brown complexion and cascading black hair, embodied the strength and beauty of her heritage. Betrothed to Zahur at a young age, a political pawn in her father's quest for power, she had nonetheless grown to love the man who stood beside her through war and peace. Now, at sixty-five, the passage of time had etched a few lines on her face, strands of silver weaving through her once raven locks. Yet, her eyes still held the spark of the warrior princess, a fire that mirrored the disquiet stirring within her as she watched the approaching figures.

Tonight, Belkis had let her cascading black hair fall loose, the strands brushing suggestively against her chest. Zahur sat on the edge of the bed, an uncharacteristic stillness clinging to him. She knew this quietude well – the aftermath of taking lives, the burden of war etched on his broad shoulders.

"Did I hear you right?" she asked, her voice laced with amusement. "Chiku asked for a lion last night? Wants to reclaim her grandsire's growl, she says?"

A flicker of a smile played on Zahur's lips, a fleeting echo of the warmth she craved. They both chuckled at the image of their spirited daughter, a wild streak mirroring her mother's own warrior heritage.

But the laughter died quickly, replaced by a heavy silence. Belkis reached out, her hand hovering over his. “Zahur,” she said softly, her voice a caress. He always loved the sound of it, a familiar balm in the storm.

He turned to her, his gaze distant. “She takes after Bbaka, doesn’t she?” he asked, his voice rough. “How is she?”

“Scared, but trying to be brave,” Belkis replied, her voice steady. “She asked to sleep with Akina tonight.”

Another ghost of a smile, tinged with sadness. “Akina will weave her tales and she’ll be fast asleep,” Belkis said, her voice filling the void.

The conversation shifted, a letter from King Piya arrived during Zahur’s absence. The invitation to the wedding, a girl of fourteen to become the king’s wife, sat heavy in the air.

“That man has an insatiable appetite,” Zahur muttered, a vein throbbing on his temple.

“Refusing could be seen as an insult,” Belkis pointed out gently.

“He knows I disapprove,” Zahur said, his jaw clenched. “But…”

“He included it in the letter, didn’t he?” Belkis finished his sentence, a knowing glint in her eyes.

Zahur sighed, the weight of responsibility settling on him. “Hami will go in my place,” he announced. “Time for him to begin his duties as heir apparent.”

Belkis raised an eyebrow. “He won’t be pleased.”

“He doesn’t have to be,” Zahur retorted, a hint of steel in his voice. “He’s the next in line. This is part of it. Besides, Tingi is a good city. The people there are loyal.”

Belkis nodded, her gaze lingering on her husband. The reunion held a bittersweet taste. There were unspoken words, a tension that vibrated beneath the surface of their conversation. As Zahur turned away, a flicker of worry crossed her mind. Was this distance a result of the war, or something more? The invitation to King Piya’s wedding hung heavy in the air, a potential storm brewing on the horizon.

Belkis had spent the night grappling with the disquiet that gnawed at her. As dawn painted the sky, she rose, a warrior princess preparing to face an uncertain future. Azania, their mountaintop castle, loomed before her, a monument to a bygone era. The castle, carved into the very rock of the mountain’s peak, had witnessed centuries of Alkebulan history. Kueth Taha, the revered crafter, had envisioned it as a bastion of power, impregnable and awe-inspiring.

Belkis, however, despised his design. The throne room, the heart of the castle, resided on the western side, offering breath-taking views of the sprawling plains below. Yet, it lay separated from the eastern wing where the royal chambers were housed. This physical separation mirrored the distance that had grown between her and Zahur. Her father’s palace in Aswan, bathed in the golden glow of the Abyssinian sun, had thrummed with the energy of power, the royal chambers positioned for constant vigilance and connection. Here, in Azania’s cold solitude, she felt like a queen in exile.

Clad in a magnificent gown, a vibrant tapestry woven with the colors of her mother's Darod clan, Belkis strode through the vast hallways. Sweat beaded on her brow despite the cool morning air – a reflection of her internal turmoil as much as the exertion of climbing the winding staircases that snaked through the mountain's interior. Azania's geography, while offering unparalleled defense, was a maze of corridors and hidden chambers, a far cry from the open courtyards and central courtyards of her childhood home.

Zahur sat in the throne room, already dispensing justice to the throng of petitioners gathered before him. The weight of war still clung to him, a distance in his eyes that mirrored the physical separation enforced by the castle's design. When she took her seat beside him, breathless and flushed, a ghost of a smile played on his lips. It was a familiar gesture, yet it failed to reach his eyes.

The business of the court continued – recruitment of new Morans, pronouncements on petty squabbles. Belkis sat through it all, a regal observer, yet a part of her yearned to break the invisible barrier that had grown between them. The reunion, so ardently desired, felt hollow, a performance for the court rather than a genuine reconnection. As the last petitioner left, the silence in the throne room grew deafening. Belkis knew this was her moment, the time to bridge the chasm. But what words could she use to mend a heart burdened by unspoken truths?

The weight of Azania's imposing structure pressed down on Belkis as she watched Hami depart. The castle, once

a symbol of power and security, now felt like a gilded cage, mirroring the hollowness she felt within.

Earlier that day, the tension in the throne room had been palpable. Meghan's arrival with news had been brushed aside by Zahur, his focus solely on Hami. The announcement of the invitation to King Piya's wedding hung heavy in the air, a potent reminder of the distance between them.

Hami, ever the dutiful son, had accepted the responsibility placed upon him, albeit with reluctance. Belkis understood his frustration. Why send him, the heir apparent, to a celebration in a faraway city, when their own Damu, a skilled warrior, or Akina, with her captivating voice, would have been more fitting choices?

Yet, she also saw the wisdom in Zahur's decision. Hami needed to learn the ways of diplomacy, to forge connections with other clans beyond the isolated walls of Azania. It was a necessary step on his path to becoming Chieftain.

As she embraced Hami, the scent of sweat and leather mingled with the familiar warmth of her son. "Travel safe, son," she whispered, her voice thick with unspoken emotions.

His departure left a void in the vast castle, a stark reminder of the sacrifices demanded by duty. Belkis retreated to the solitude of her chambers, the vibrant colors of her Darod heritage offering little comfort in the face of the storm brewing within her. What did Hami truly desire? And where did Zahur's heart lie, shrouded

in the secrets of the war and the unspoken truths that festered between them?

The weight of the day pressed heavily on Belkis. She had bustled through the kitchens, her sharp eyes ensuring every pot simmered and every loaf rose with the desired puff. She'd dragged a reluctant Chiku to the communal study room, the rhythmic chanting of the girls echoing through the cool stone hallways. Even Mbosso, usually a whirlwind of boundless energy, hadn't escaped her sharp eye. He was discovered nestled amongst the sweet-smelling hay in the stables, a mischievous glint in his eyes as Belkis sent a servant to rouse him.

By nightfall, she sought solace in the company of the other chieftain's wives. Gathered in the ornately woven tapestries of the Queen's chamber, they traded gossip with the practiced ease of seasoned warriors, their laughter tinkling like wind chimes in the high-vaulted room.

Later, as the castle settled into the hush of night, Belkis found Zahur already abed within their opulent chambers. The flickering candlelight cast dancing shadows on the blue and gold tapestries, a comforting reminder of her Abyssinian heritage despite the cold stone walls of Azania. She slipped into the bed beside him, the familiar scent of leather and woodsmoke wrapping around her like a shield.

His fingers, work-roughened yet gentle, began to weave through her hair. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken thoughts. Finally, she broke the quiet. "What troubles you, Zahur?"

He sighed, a deep rumble that resonated through the vast chamber. “The storm is coming, Belkis. I feel it in my bones.” The words, spoken in the guttural tongue of the northern people, sent a shiver down her spine. Every tribe in Alkebulan had their own pronouncements, their whispers of power and destiny. Yet, the Taha words, passed down through generations, always evoked a primal fear within her.

“The Mursi I killed…” he began, his voice low and strained. “There was something about him, a darkness in his eyes that chilled me to the core. He spoke in riddles, words that seemed like the ramblings of a madman. But…”

He paused, his brow furrowed in concentration. “But there was a conviction in his voice, Belkis. A desperate plea that echoed a chilling truth. This is the third in fourteen days, all with the same message, the Flameguard sent a message speaking of a madman from the red people speaking of the same evil. This man, a Himba, he claims to be a Dreamwalker, he says he had see the Nightdancer, a warning dismissed as myth by many.

“What if it’s true, what if the warnings are real and we are all doomed Belkis.”

Belkis reached for his hand, her touch warm and steady in the cool night air. “The flameguards are doing a sufficient job guarding the wall,” she said, her voice firm despite the tremor in her heart.

Zahur’s face remained grim. “That’s the problem, Belkis,” he said and grabbed a scroll. “ The man I killed didn’t seem like an enemy. I could see it in his face.”

Belkis watched the furrow deepen between Zahur’s brows as he read the report. “Strength below a thousand,” he muttered, his voice heavy with concern. “Desertions, illnesses… madness and plagues?”

“The wall needs men,” Zahur said, his gaze hardening. Belkis knew that glint in his eyes – the glint of a warrior preparing for battle.

“There could be a solution to all this, my love,” she said, her voice a soothing balm. “Perhaps a letter to the northern chiefs, requesting additional flameguards. The northern chieftains, their loyalty lies with us. They will surely provide more men.”

A flicker of a smile touched Zahur’s lips as he turned to her. The tension eased from his brow, replaced by a familiar warmth. He leaned in, and Belkis met him halfway, their kiss a silent promise of love and unwavering support in the face of the gathering storm.

The rhythmic pulse of rain drumming on the windowpane lulled Belkis and Zahur into a restless sleep. A sudden, insistent rapping at the door shattered the fragile peace. An elderly figure, Guru Maghan, his white beard illuminated by the single flickering candle, stood before them. Eighty years etched on his face spoke of a lifetime spent serving the Taha household.

“A letter, my lady,” he rasped, his voice laden with a weight of unspoken urgency. He extended a small,

tightly sealed parchment bearing the Denkyem sigil of the Chewa tribe – a tribe where Belkis's sister is married too.

Belkis snatched the letter, her heart hammering a frantic tattoo against her ribs. Ayana wouldn't send a message under the cloak of night unless something dire threatened. She threw back the covers, her bare feet landing on the cool stone floor with a soft thud. As she tore open the seal, Zahur watched her, his brow furrowed in concern. The worry that bloomed on her face was a stark contrast to the peaceful slumber moments before.

"Adia?" Zahur's voice was a low rumble, laced with a tremor of dread.

"Musa is dead," Belkis choked out, her voice barely a whisper. Ayana's words echoed in her mind, a chilling indictment. The Kush. The mere mention of the name sent a shiver down her spine. War, a terrible, consuming beast, lurked at the edges of her vision.

"Our daughter... my sister... they're in danger," she stammered, fear twisting her features into a mask of terror. Zahur was already out of bed, his movements resolute.

"Where are they? Cairo won't be safe, nor the Besin," he said, his voice tight with barely suppressed anger.

Belkis shook her head, the letter offering no solace. "There's only one place I can think of. Chieftain Cudjoe. Sunni's bannerman. The Kush wouldn't dare touch them there."

Maghan, who had remained a silent sentinel throughout the exchange, spoke, his voice hoarse with age and wisdom. “Not for long, my lady. The Kush have eyes and ears everywhere. Cudjoe’s walls will offer scant protection against their assassins.”

Panic clawed at Belkis’s throat. “We have to get them out,” Zahur declared, his voice leaving no room for argument. “.We’ll need the Morans.”

Maghan bowed curtly and retreated, his footsteps fading into the vast emptiness of the castle corridors. Belkis stood by the window, the half-moon hanging sentinel in the sky, seemingly unfazed by the turmoil brewing beneath it. Clouds scudded across its face, casting fleeting shadows that mirrored the dread that coiled in her heart. The storm that had threatened on the horizon for so long had finally broken, and Belkis knew, with a chilling certainty, that this was just the beginning.

As a large cloud rolled across the half-moon, plunging the eastern side of Azania into momentary darkness, a chilling thought of Adia flickered in Belkis’s mind. Ever since Ayana had taken her in Elmina, Adia had been a constant presence – a mischievous spirit just a few years older than Chiku. Now, at thirteen, on the cusp of womanhood, her daughter was in danger. The image of Adia, vulnerable and threatened, sent a jolt of fear through Belkis.

Worse yet, her mind conjured a horrifying picture of Ayana’s fate if captured by the Kush. It was a path too dark to contemplate. Pushing away these morbid thoughts, Belkis rose from the window and began to

dress with a newfound urgency. Her gaze fell upon the familiar sight hanging on the stone wall – Zahur's ebony sword. Crafted from the legendary Khabaa steel, one of only three such blades in all of Alkebulan, it glinted in the flickering candlelight. Beside it, the sleek form of her own spear, "Dark Widow," whispered a silent promise of vengeance.

Picking up the spear, Belkis hefted its weight, the familiar feel grounding her in a warrior's resolve. Fear still gnawed at her, but it was now tempered by a steely determination. Adia, Ayana – whoever was responsible for this would face the wrath of a mother lioness protecting her cubs. No assassin, no matter how skilled, would stand a chance against the combined might of the Morans and a queen who wouldn't hesitate to wield a Khabaa steel spear in defense of her family. As she gripped the Dark Widow tighter, Belkis knew this was more than just a rescue mission. It was a declaration of war.

Belkis emerged from the castle, a warrior queen cloaked in purpose. A hundred of Azanian finest Morans, stripped of their war paint and vibrant colors, stood assembled in the compound. Aran, their leader, met her gaze with a silent nod of understanding. Zahur, however, was a storm cloud gathering beside her.

"No," he said, his voice a low growl. "Spies crawl from every crevice in Alkebulan. We need to be like phantoms, unseen and unsuspected. Commoner's garb. Now."

Disappointment flickered across Belkis's face. She had envisioned a swift, decisive march through the Ashanti

plains, the Azania colors a potent symbol of their resolve. But Zahur's caution, born from years of war and political intrigue, held undeniable weight.

Their destination – Ashanti, south of Khanduus, nestled within the embrace of the Lalibela mountains – was a familiar one to Belkis. Yet, Zahur voiced a concern that sent a sliver of ice down her spine. The Lalibela clan brothers, he warned, were tainted by corruption, their loyalty as brittle as dry bones.

Their journey took them southeast, skirting the treacherous Lalibela territory. Three days bled into one another, each sunrise a searing reminder of the danger their family faced. Sleep eluded Belkis. Under the watchful gaze of the half-moon, a constant companion in the vast emptiness, she stood guard, her warrior's leathers a second skin. The ebony blade of her Dahomey sword hung heavy at her hip, a silent promise of retribution.

One evening, she found Zahur approaching, his face etched with concern. He held out a piece of dried rabbit meat, a stark contrast to the culinary delights of Khanduus. The wild pumpkins and the earthy tang of anthill mushrooms – a symphony of flavors she yearned for. Sometimes, she indulged in anjilla, her Abyssinian comfort food, a dish Zahur never quite acquired a taste for.

As she chewed on the dry meat, a pang of longing struck her. Ayana's cooking, a joyous explosion of spices and textures, was a distant memory from their girlhood days. Perhaps, amidst the chaos, they would find solace in a

shared meal, a taste of home in the heart of a foreign land. After all, rescuing Adia was only the first step. The true test, the storm brewing on the horizon, was yet to come.

Ayana's laughter used to echo through the palace halls, a melody that chased away the shadows and filled Belkis's heart with a warmth that rivaled the Abyssinian sun. Sometimes, a flicker of jealousy would dance at the edges of her love, for King Hella's obvious adoration of her younger sister. But it was a fleeting emotion, quickly eclipsed by the fierce love that bound them.

"We will find them, Belkis," Zahur's voice was a steady anchor in the storm of her worry.

The next morning, a new plan took root. The Gold Road, snaking through the Akan lands to the western Besin, would be their path. Here, however, the Morans' vibrant presence would be a liability.

"The Akan Chieftain treads a cautious path," Zahur explained. "Conflict is a bitter herb he avoids. We won't be granted passage with the Morans at our side."

A silent understanding passed between them. The Morans would press on to Ribat, a prearranged rendezvous point. Belkis and Zahur, traveling light and unassuming, would seek passage through the Akan lands, hoping to reach Adia and Ayana before the shadows of danger closed in.

Under the cloak of a star-studded, blue-black sky, hidden amongst the gnarled roots of an ancient oak, Belkis found a sliver of solace. By the flickering light of a single

candle, she penned three letters – one to her father, a beacon of hope sent across the miles to Aswan. Another, carrying the weight of her worry, to Hami, her eldest son, currently in Tingi. The last, addressed to Maghan, a silent plea for the loyal steward to watch over Azania and her youngest son Mbosso in their absence.

As the gates of Akan City creaked open in the dead of night, a lone figure emerged – Cudjoe, his face etched with concern. Hope, a fragile ember, flickered to life within Belkis. Perhaps, amidst the uncertainty, they would find an ally, a bridge across the churning river of fear.

CHAPTER SIX

AKINA

In three days, a new century would dawn. For seven nights, Akina had sought solace in the seer's shrine, but her dreams grew darker by the day. 'Her visions are shrouded in uncertainty,' the seer confided in Zahur.

Akina's dreams were fragmented and unsettling: bloody battles raged, men fell, and floods swept Azania away. Grotesque mad dogs devoured everything in their path. She saw visions of people divided by color – red, green, and blue – and another race where every face was identical. Chaos reigned among these duplicates, as they slaughtered one another, and the dead walked among the living.

Akina gasped, her heart pounding in her chest. In the midst of the chaotic scene, she saw a familiar face. It was Damu, her twin brother, standing amidst the colorful crowd of diverse people. He looked different now, a far cry from the boy she remembered. A thick, braided beard framed his face, and his once familiar eyes were now hidden behind a patch over his right eye. His hair had grown into long, dreadlocks that hung down his back.

A sword that was given to him by Zahur was strapped to his back, its hilt worn and battle-scarred. He looked as if he had been fighting in wars for years, his appearance a testament to the hardships he had endured. Akina couldn't believe her eyes. How had her brother ended up in such a strange and dangerous place? What had happened to the boy she had grown up with? Akina's dream recurred, its familiarity unsettling. She trudged through crimson mud, her boots heavy with the weight of carnage. The scent of blood and smoke hung heavy in the air, choking Akina's breath. Above, storm clouds boiled, lightning slashing across the dark sky like razor-sharp claws. Distant drums echoed through the storm, their beat matching Akina's racing heart. The remnants of once-mighty armies – Azania, Maasai, Shona, Abyssinia – lay scattered, a grim testament to the battle's devastating cost. Akina's gaze fell upon a figure amidst the carnage. Rhoko, Master-at-Arms of Azania, lay broken and still. His weathered face, etched with battle scars, seemed almost serene in death. His eyes, once bright with purpose, now dimly stared into the

mud. Akina’s heart ached as she recognized the symbol etched into his chestplate: the mark of the Azanian Lion.

Memories flooded her mind: Rhoko’s stern guidance during training, his unwavering loyalty to Azania, and the quiet moments they shared by the campfire. Akina recalled the way Rhoko’s eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, and the deep rumble of his laughter. As she stood there, a figure emerged from the shadows. Hooded and faceless, they watched Akina with an unnerving intensity. Their presence seemed to draw the air out of the scene, leaving only an oppressive silence.

Rhoko’s voice whispered in her mind, ‘Protect… the… people…’. Akina’s vision blurred as tears fell, mingling with the mud. She felt the weight of Rhoko’s words, the burden of responsibility he’d left her.

The mysterious figure vanished as suddenly as they appeared, leaving Akina alone with Rhoko’s lifeless body. The storm raged on, but Akina’s heart was quieter, her resolve hardened.

Akina’s eyes snapped open, her heart still racing from the dream. She sat up on the stone bench, surrounded by the cold, dark walls of the shrine. Animal skins and skulls adorned the walls, eerie silhouettes in the flickering torchlight.

The air was heavy with the scent of old incense and damp earth. Rhoko’s face lingered in her mind, his eyes dimly staring into the mud. She threw off her woolen blanket and stared at the flickering fire in the middle of the shrine.

The weight of Rhoko's words echoed in her mind: 'Protect... the... people...'. How could she fulfill that promise? What was the meaning of these words.

Akina's thoughts drifted to Seydou, the only one who could unravel the tangled threads of her disturbing dreams, which had haunted her since childhood. Belkis, convinced Akina was possessed, had urged Zahur to exile her and her brother from Azania. But Zahur stood firm, refusing to abandon them, " For they were the last blood line of Niss." But he wouldn't say it loud.

As Akina sat amidst pyramid-like stone walls of the shrine, carpeted with animal skins, her sighs resonated through the ancient structure, blending with the whispers of the past. The weight of her ancestors' gaze settled upon her, their expectations and hopes oppressive yet familiar.

Her mind raced, thinking of Rhoko's last words in a dream. "Protect the people" She had never dreamt of Rhoko before, it was her first time, and the message it carried weighed on her. she had seen his shield broken his face in the mad; as a child she had always seen Rhoko on the training grounds with Hami and Damu, and sometimes with Belkis whenever she wanted to polish her sword fight. He was always on his legs and the others on ground. This time in a dream, his face was in the mad and his shield broken, 'what dis this mean' a question lingered in her mind.

Akina's earliest memories were of Rhoko's stern yet gentle guidance. Orphaned at a young age with her twin brother Damu, they were taken in by the Azanian

warriors’ the Taha clan, where Rhoko became a mentor and guardian among the people of Azania Castle.

Rhoko, once a renowned warrior, had lost his own family in a brutal raid in Lam. His pain and regret fueled his dedication to protecting Akina and Damu, who reminded him of his lost daughter. He trained Damu in combat, strategy, and sword fight, he trained Akina how to ride a horse and how to skin a rabbit.

As Akina grew, Rhoko’s mentorship evolved into a fatherly bond for the twins. He shared tales of Azania’s history, instilling pride and responsibility within her. “ he is still here” she told herself. “no need to worry.”

Saydou, seated in the shadows, watched Akina with an unwavering gaze. Her golden eyes, like polished amber, shone bright in the dim light. Her dark skin seemed to absorb the shadows, making her almost invisible. Intricate scars etched her cheeks, telling stories of ancient rituals and mystical powers. A crown of braids, adorned with tiny bones and feathers, rested upon her head. She wore a cloak woven from the pelts of sacred animals, its patterns whispering secrets to those who listened.

Akina turned to face Saydou, who was seated by the fire. Their eyes met, and Akina felt the depth of Saydou’s wisdom and knowledge.

“What does this mean Saydou?” Akina asked.

“You need to go the lighthouse child. Only there you find answers, your dreams are beyond my knowledge”

Saydou began smoking on her pipe that was filled with all the herbs.

Akina had to inhale all of the smoke as was the ritual before she left the shrine.

Akina emerged from the shrine after a restless night spent with the seer Seydou. The sun had already sent its rays through the trees, for a moment she stopped and spread her arms and let the sun go through her. From there she picked some fruits; it was her routine every morning before the went to the castle.

Returning to the castle, Akina found her sister, Chiku, observing Damu practice swordsmanship in the training yard.

“Good morning, Akina,” Kito greeted her.

Akina mumbled a reply, her thoughts preoccupied.

News of an upcoming tournament filled the air, with rumors of famed fighters and even the crown prince himself attending.

“They won’t stand a chance in the pits,” Akina remarked to Damu.

“I hope the prince is as skilled as they say,” Damu replied.

“Of course he is,” Monkey-Face chimed in. “The crown prince deserves nothing but praise.”

Noticing the deserted castle grounds, Akina inquired, “Something seems different. Where is everyone?”

“Your father and Belkis left abruptly last night with the Morans,” Monkey-Face informed her.

Akina’s mind race to the taunting dream about Rhoko. “And Rhoko?” she found herself asking.

“He went with them”

Determined to know what was going on, Akina declared, “In that case, I’m coming with you to the lighthouse.”

Damu cautioned, “Father won’t be happy about this.”

Akina smirked, “I must go, Damu. I have to go to the lighthouse.”

Zahur, determined to provide Akina with every opportunity, had hired the finest tutor from Timbuktu to educate her in all branches of knowledge. Instilled with a love for reading, she possessed an insatiable hunger for knowledge. Ever since childhood, whispers of black herons returning to Alkebulan haunted her dreams. When she confided in her father, he dismissed them as mere childhood fears.

But she was no longer a child, the dreams persisted, and the visions grew more vivid. She recounted her dreams to the seer Saydou of Azania, a revered figure believed to possess prophetic abilities. The seer, urging secrecy, warned her that the herons heralded the gods’ return, both benevolent and malevolent. Fearing for her, the seer, from that day on her fifth nameday, began training her as her successor, preparing her for the burden of destiny that awaited her on her sixteenth nameday.

“The black herons are gone,” her brother assured her after she revealed her desire to accompany him to

Petelands. “Extinct for four hundred years, like the first gods, since the Night Dancer’s battle.” The realm had never seen the mystical birds since the legendary battle. Though other magical creatures existed, choosing kings and healers, guiding warriors and offering solace, the herons’ return held a unique significance.

“Their return would signal the gods’ return,” the old seer had once explained. “And the Night Dancer’s return would follow. I don’t intend to frighten you, child, but the herons represent a duality – harbingers of both good and evil.”

Chiku, filled with childish curiosity, had hidden herself in the boxes that carried Akina’s clothes. Damu and his men, whom he called brothers, rode on horses while Akina traveled in a wagon pulled by two horses. After a day’s journey through the hills and mountains of Saylac and Timgad, Chiku woke up from her hiding place, forgetting she was concealed.

“We should head home, we can’t take her with us,” Damu told his sister.

“I will take care of Chiku, don’t worry about her,” Akina said.

“If Belkis knows about this, she will not be happy,” Damu replied.

“Then we should hurry. By the time they come back, we will be home. All Chiku wants is to see the actors, I think we should let her,” Akina persuaded.

Akina wore a white linen dress with blue flowers decorating the hem. Chiku giggled when she realized

Damu wasn’t taking her back to Azania. There was no need to worry; Akina knew her brother was a skilled fighter who would protect them from any danger.

This journey was a thrilling adventure for Chiku, her first time venturing beyond her father’s lands and the territories of their occasional visitors from Azania. Damu smiled as he watched her peek out from the wagon, captivated by the passing trees. They approached Lalibela Bay, a small fishing village bordering the Fingers, a group of islands renowned for their talented actors.

“We’ll take a ship to the Fingers,” Damu announced.

“I don’t like ships,” Akina muttered.

“We have no choice if we want to reach Matamba on time,” Damu replied.

Chiku buzzed with excitement. In a single day, she had travelled beyond Khanduus, Toposa, Gedi town of Azande, and Fayum city of the lost gods. Now, she would spend a night on a ship, venturing far from home. Akina, who disliked boats, reluctantly agreed as it was the fastest route.

The ship, a trader vessel collecting spices and salt, was bound for Kasala and the cities of Abyssinia. In the dead of night, while everyone slept peacefully, Akina dreamt of a storm raging in an endless night.

Her dream turned into a terrifying reality. The storm raged with a fury Chiku had never witnessed. Thunder boomed like the angry roars of a god, and lightning split the night sky, momentarily illuminating the monstrous

waves that threatened to engulf the ship. A fierce storm struck, throwing the vessel off course. Screams filled the air as crew members scrambled for safety. Some were swept overboard, clinging to ropes until Damu’s men pulled them up in the morning. The captain, injured from a blow to the head, discovered half his crew missing.

Little Chiku, taking advantage of her small size, had hidden in a box during the storm. Trapped in the dark, damp box, Chiku fought back tears. With every creak of the ship and crash of the waves, she feared the box would break open, tossing her into the churning sea.

The next morning, as everyone worried about her disappearance, she surprised them by popping out of the box. “Looks like boxes are your lucky charm, little one,” Monkey Face said with a chuckle, patting her spice-dusted hair. The storm had driven them far off course, crashing the ship on the rocky shores of Kirua bay, a desolate location far from Matamba. The shipwreck lay beached on the unforgiving shore, waves relentlessly gnawing at its hull. Eerie cries echoed from the cliffs, sending shivers down Chiku’s spine. What creatures dwelled in this desolate place?

It was in the clear of day when Akina, Damu, his men, and the rest of the survivors disembarked. None had ventured this far south of Azania, into a region some might mistakenly consider the north. The storm’s fury had claimed several lives; some ship attendants were lost overboard, and others succumbed to injuries by the time Akina and Chiku emerged from their cabin.

“These lands are not for the faint of heart,” the wary trader had warned Damu when he suggested making landfall. Kirua wasn’t just notorious as a slaver’s haven but also bore a darker reputation: the haunted kingdom, the land of fear, the kingdom of skulls – all grim titles earned in the aftermath of past wars.

Mpingo, a name that sent chills down Akina’s spine, greeted them. Black wooden fences and dark stones like watchful eyes surrounded every ramshackle hut. A single, ominous well stood in the center, its depths unseen. The silence was broken only by the rustle of the wind through the spear grass roofs and the creak of the tattered hide window shutters. Above them loomed the pale limbs and black leaves of a monstrous Mpingo tree, its gnarled branches clawing at the sky like skeletal fingers. An unsettling aura hung heavy in the air, making Akina’s skin crawl.

The Mpingo tree, a titan sculpted from obsidian, dominated the village. Its colossal trunk, impossibly smooth and black, seemed to absorb the sunlight rather than reflect it. The size did not disturb Akina so much as the roots... the roots especially. They snaked across the ground like monstrous serpents, some hollow and wide enough to swallow a man whole. Houses, built precariously within the gnarled embrace of these roots, resembled offerings trapped in a malevolent grasp.

“These are the god trees the books talk about,” Akina thought. She had read about them in the old book kept in her father’s library. The people of Alkeblan believed in many gods before the coming of the first gods that looked like humans. Some Kiruas of Kirua had kept their

god, the Mpingo tree god, who protected them from any harm.

“This must be one of those villages,” Akina thought. But the village was deserted. An oppressive silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the skittering of unseen creatures in the undergrowth. The village itself seemed to be holding its breath, as if anticipating their arrival. An invisible threat prickled at Akina’s skin, a feeling that they were being watched by unseen eyes.

“We need horses, and a map to get us home,” Damu said. The foot routes were still visible. Akina followed him, trusting him to get them home. But the worry for her younger sister, Chiku, had overshadowed even the black herons’ troubling return.

Akina was a twin, daughter to the Chieftain of the North in Azania. Perhaps that’s why she hadn’t suffered the fate of other twins in Alkeblan. Zahur had kept her hidden away in a castle, raising her as his child but not bestowing his name upon her. Now, a new fear gnawed at her – had she endangered Chiku by bringing her on this perilous journey?

Akina watched Chiku skip ahead, gathering wildflowers and weaving stories from the leaves in her hands. Back in Azania, they were inseparable, sharing meals, knitting projects, even when Chiku loved them not, and whispered secrets under the covers. Now, a fierce resolve hardened Akina’s gaze. She had to be resourceful for Chiku’s sake. Chiku, however, remained blissfully unaware of the danger. The thrill of adventure

still clung to her like the pollen dust clinging to her braids.

Akina scanned the endless expanse – a monotonous tapestry of scrubland, jagged mountains, and skeletal trees that clawed at the unforgiving sky. Damu, who had confidently led the way out of Mpingo village, now wore a mask of unease.

The once-clear path had vanished, swallowed by the relentless trees that seemed to shift every passing time. The silence was broken only by the mournful cry of a lone bird circling high above.

“We tread carefully,” Akina warned, her voice laced with concern. “These lands are notorious for slavers. Anyone strong enough can steal your freedom here.” Chiku, for the first time, noticed the tension in her sister’s voice. Her playful smile faltered, replaced by a flicker of worry in her big, brown eyes.

Damu knelt beside a barely visible footprint in the dry leaves. It was old, partially obscured by the new brown leaves and wind that passed through the trees but the imprint of a worn sandal was unmistakable. “These tracks lead east,” he muttered, tracing the faded pattern with a calloused finger. “But how long ago were they made? Days? Weeks?”

A cold dread settled in Akina’s stomach. Lost without a map or a guide, their supplies dwindling with each passing day, they were like desert flowers – vibrant one moment, wilting and dying the next under the harsh desert sun. The once-bright dream of reaching

Alexandria at the Lighthouse now seemed like a mirage shimmering on the horizon, forever out of reach.

Suddenly, a glint of metal caught Akina’s eye. Half-buried in the dead leaves, a single silver earring lay half-hidden. Its intricate design, a swirling pattern unlike anything she’d seen before, sent a tremor of unease through her. Was it a relic from a long-dead civilization? Or a grim reminder of a recent capture by slavers? The forest, vast and silent, offered no answers, only deepening the mystery and fueling their fear.

She remembered the stories of her Guru, about the scattered clans of Kirua people after the second rebellion. Plagues had come next after the rebellion, claiming almost half the population of the land. Hunger visited after the Plague, fathers began selling their sons for food, mothers did the same after they had lost all the men in the family, and now the strong preyed on the weak.

“I hear there are a lot of slavers on this land,” Bahati had said.

“Are you scared of being sold, big girl? I would buy you for my clown,” Towila had teased jokingly.

The river, a blue-green ribbon, shimmered in the afternoon sun. Reeds grew thick in the shallows along the banks, and Akina spotted a water snake skimming across the surface, its sinuous body leaving ripples in its wake. Overhead, a hawk circled lazily in the cloudless sky.

“Could it be a heron?” Akina wondered for a fleeting moment. But the hawk, with its sharp beak and piercing gaze, was a far cry from the mystical bird that haunted her dreams.

It seemed a peaceful place... until Fish-neck’s voice shattered the illusion. “There, in the reeds,” he pointed, his voice laced with a tremor of dread. Akina’s heart hammered against her ribs as her gaze followed his outstretched finger. The idyllic scene vanished, replaced by a horrifying tableau. The body of an old man, bloated and grotesque, lay partially submerged in the reeds. A grotesque sight, with a reed protruding from his distended stomach and a swarm of maggots feasting on his decaying flesh.

“There must be a village or town nearby,” Damu said, his voice grim. “We should press on before nightfall.”

Chiku, for all her initial trepidation, seemed to have embraced the adventure. The harsh desert landscape, a stark contrast to the lush greenery of Azania, held a strange fascination for her. She skipped along the path, her braids adorned with colorful feathers – a souvenir from a particularly friendly vulture they’d encountered earlier. Akina, however, remained on edge. Her grip tightened on the hilt of the dagger her father had gifted her. Every rustle of wind, every shadow cast by a passing cloud, sent a jolt of nervous energy through her. The half-buried earring, a silent memento of their forest journey, felt heavy in her pouch. It was a constant reminder of the dangers that lurked in this unforgiving land, a land where beauty and brutality existed in an unsettling equilibrium.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ADIA

The dust swirled around Adia’s ankles as she trekked alongside Abena and Kofi towards the tourney grounds. The midday sun beat down mercilessly, turning the parched earth into a shimmering haze. Adia, at fourteen, was already taller than most girls her age, her frame coltish and strong. Her reflection in the polished metal of her practice staff mocked her with the unfamiliar curves of her developing figure. Abena’s words, laced with a strange mixture of envy and amusement, echoed in her ears: “A face a prince would love.” Adia scoffed. Princes and love were far from her mind. Today was about the tourney – a grueling competition of brave men killing or get killed

A cloud of dust rose as Adia trekked alongside her new friends, Abena and Kofi, towards the tournament grounds.

“They say the gods built these walls,” Kofi remarked, wiping sweat from her brow.

Adia scoffed. “Who says?”

“My uncle,” Kofi mumbled.

Abena rolled her eyes. “Your uncle and his wild stories. Everyone knows they were built by men, free and enslaved.”

Adia wasn’t interested in dusty legends. Her eyes were fixed on the magnificent pyramids that rose from the

desert plains beyond the city walls. Unlike the imposing walls, these ancient monuments spoke of a glorious past, a bygone era of pharaohs and wonder. She had devoured every book in the city library of Elmina about them, and the sight of them never failed to stir her imagination.

The closer they got to the tourney grounds, the more the excitement crackled in the air. A hundred pavilions had been erected, teeming with people. The common folk, dressed in their finest clothes, spilled out of the city gates, their cheers echoing across the desert sands. Adia's breath hitched at the sight of gleaming armor, richly decorated horses, and the banners of rival houses snapping in the wind. But it was the warriors themselves who truly captivated her – their focused gazes and rippling muscles promised a spectacle unlike anything she had ever witnessed.

This was more than just a competition; it was a chance to catch a glimpse of the world beyond the walls, a world of adventure, honor, and maybe even love.

Amidst the throngs of spectators, Adia spotted Abena and Kofi cheering themselves hoarse for their boyfriends. Adia, however, had no such companion. Her heart ached with a loneliness that the spectacle couldn't quite drown out. But then, a booming voice resonated through the arena, announcing the opening match. A hush fell over the crowd, and all eyes turned to the center of the arena. Adia's pulse quickened. This was it. The test that would determine her future.

Adia shifted on the rough wooden bench, the festive atmosphere feeling strained under the weight of

impending violence. The crowd's roar intensified as the fighters entered the arena. Adia's breath caught in her throat. These weren't the polished duelists she'd witnessed in her aunt's training yard. These men were honed weapons, their scarred physiques etched with the brutal history of past battles.

A primal fear coiled in Adia's stomach, but it was quickly overshadowed by a strange fascination. The way they moved, a deadly ballet of anticipation and aggression, held her gaze captive. This wasn't a mere competition; it was a dance with death, and Adia, despite her apprehension, couldn't tear her eyes away.

Adia, accustomed to the opulent company of her Auntie Ayana, the high lords, and their ladies, felt a jolt of excitement and trepidation as she entered the common grounds of the tournament. Gone were the polished manners and refined conversations; here, the air thrummed with raw energy. The crowd, a vibrant tapestry of people from all walks of life, cheered and jeered with uninhibited passion. Adia spotted shirtless men, pregnant women with bared bellies, and even homeless children, all united in their fervent anticipation of the games.

Juxtaposed against the joyous chaos were the stark realities of violence. Adia's eyes snagged on the dark stains marring the wooden blockades – grim reminders of past battles.

"Here, you see people die properly," Kofi remarked, a hint of dark amusement in her voice. "Terrifying, yet strangely captivating."

A shiver danced down Adia’s spine. Death was a familiar concept, whispered in hushed tones within the palace walls, but here, it was a tangible presence.

“Have you ever seen someone die up close, Adia?” Abena’s question hung heavy in the air.

Adia swallowed, the question a stark counterpoint to the festive atmosphere. “I’ve…seen death,” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper.

This was a world far removed from her own gilded cage. A self-conscious smile touched her lips as she noticed the commoners’ stares. Dressed in her finery, a vision of emerald green that accentuated her dark hair, she felt like a foreign object amidst the throng. A young boy, his clothes dusty and worn, clutched at the hem of her gown, his wide eyes shining with fascination.

The fighters entered the arena, their scarred visages and rippling muscles testaments to their brutal trade. A collective gasp rippled through the crowd as they sized each other up, predators poised for the kill. This was more than just a competition; it was a visceral dance with death, and Adia, despite her trepidation, was enthralled.

A tremor of fear shot through Adia as Gatkuoth, a towering figure cloaked in darkness, entered the pit. His scarred flesh and deep tattoos, like a map of past battles, spoke of a warrior hardened by countless clashes. Whispers swirled around him – a man seemingly untouched, a relentless force of destruction.

“Oh my, he is very tall,” Adia murmured, a shiver dancing down her spine. The air hung heavy with anticipation, thick enough to choke on. Every rustle in the crowd, every creak of the wooden stands, sent a jolt through her.

“They say he’s been cut down, stabbed through, but never felled,” Abena explained, her voice laced with a morbid fascination that Adia couldn’t quite grasp. “He doesn’t speak. All he knows is the dance of death.”

Adia’s unease intensified as Gatkuoth’s dark eyes locked on his opponent, Baggara of Goru. A guttural roar erupted from the crowd, a tidal wave of sound that seemed to vibrate the very ground beneath them. Gatkuoth swung his obsidian blade, the polished surface catching the harsh desert sun and flashing a deadly glint. A counterpoint of fear and morbid curiosity battled within Adia. Her friends, fueled by the bloodlust of the crowd, whooped and hollered, their excitement echoing off the dusty stands. But Adia saw something else entirely.

She saw the raw brutality etched on Gatkuoth’s face, a mask of grim concentration that sent chills down her spine. She saw the desperate struggle for survival mirrored in Baggara’s eyes, the fear warring with a warrior’s pride. The cheering masses blurred into the background as she became solely focused on the deadly dance unfolding in the pit. The stench of sweat, leather, and something metallic, a tang that hinted at past violence, filled her nostrils. A single bead of sweat trickled down Adia’s temple, mirroring the one that snaked its way down Gatkuoth’s scarred cheek. In that

moment, the line between spectator and participant felt dangerously thin. A sudden, rough tug on her arm snapped Adia out of her trance. She jerked sideways, almost losing her balance, her heart pounding in her chest as she was yanked away from the spectacle below. She whipped around to see Hod, his expression hard as stone, urgency etched into every line of his face.

“We’re leaving. Now,” he said, his voice a low growl, barely audible over the roar of the crowd.

Kofi and Abena didn’t even glance her way, their attention locked on the bloody combat in the pit. Confusion swirled in Adia’s mind as she stumbled after Hod, his grip on her arm unyielding, almost painful. The excitement of the tournament fell away like a curtain dropping, replaced by a rising sense of dread.

“Hod—what’s going on? How did you find me?” she gasped, trying to keep pace with his long strides.

“I always know where to find you, my lady,” he said curtly, his tone leaving no room for argument. His eyes darted around, scanning the crowd, as if expecting danger to erupt at any moment. “This isn’t safe. You shouldn’t be here.”

A cold chill ran down her spine. Relief flickered in her chest—Hod had come for her, just like he always did—but it was quickly swallowed by fear. Something was wrong. Deeply wrong. She looked over her shoulder at the arena, the cheers and jeers of the crowd blurring into a distant hum. Her heart raced as they pushed through the throngs of spectators, her emerald dress drawing curious stares.

“Hod, where is my auntie? She wasn’t at the tournament. Neither was the Chieftain,” Adia said, her voice tight with anxiety. The knot in her stomach tightened. “What’s happening?”

Hod’s jaw clenched, and his hand tightened around her arm as she tried to pull free.

“The Chieftain is dead,” he said, his voice grim and final. “And your auntie sent me to get you. You’re in danger. We need to move. Now.”

The ground seemed to fall away beneath her feet. Dead? The Chieftain was dead? Her mind reeled, struggling to catch up with his words. She opened her mouth to speak, but only a strangled gasp came out.

“H-how?” she managed, barely above a whisper. “What happened?

Hod’s eyes narrowed, glancing back at the arena where the crowd continued to roar, oblivious to the danger outside the walls.

“Not now. We’ll talk later. For now, trust me. We need to get out of here before they find you.”

Adia’s chest tightened with fear, but she nodded, her legs moving automatically as Hod pulled her through the crowd, away from the blood-soaked pit and the danger she hadn’t seen coming.

Adia’s thoughts drifted back to her early days in Azania, where her bond with Hod was forged since infancy. As her sworn protector, it was Hod’s duty to guard the highborn, but Adia had become the daughter he never

had. When she was sent to live with her aunt in Elmina at eight, Hod followed, ever-vigilant.

They shared meals, strolled through yellow-flowered gardens, and laughed beneath the warm sun. When she grew tired, Hod would carry her to bed. He taught her how to ride horses, though Adia's passions lay elsewhere. Her dreams revolved around beauty, singing, weaving, poetry, and the hope of one day marrying a chieftain's son. No matter where she went, Hod was always close by. By twelve, Adia began to long for privacy, wanting at times to walk through the streets without Hod trailing behind, sword strapped to his back. Yet, even when she tried to slip away from the castle walls of Elmina, Hod always found her.

"Sometimes, I just want to be alone. There's no danger for me here," Adia confided to her aunt when they left Elmina for Cairo, where they would attend the coronation of the Crown Prince.

In Cairo, Adia found a sense of freedom. She made new friends, Kofi and Abena, and was happy that Hod no longer followed her so closely. For once, she could explore the city on her own terms.

"You should be careful. This city isn't as safe as you think," Hod had warned her.

The thought tagged her back to the present, away from the safety of the memory. The noise of the tourney grounds faded as they walked through the marketplace, passing animal skin sellers, climbing the hill toward the smaller pyramids.

Cairo's bustling heart seemed far behind them. They moved through the small town of iron smelters, it was here that Hod purchased a black horse, it's intense gaze unsettling Adi.

The broze gate they approached was lightly guarded, Hod tossed a bag of coin to one of the guards and the gate swung open. Adia soon realized the journey ahead would be long- toward Niani.

She hadn't left Cairo's walls since they'd arrived two weeks ago, and now she found herself in Niani, a large, wall-less town. It was unlike any place she had ever known. Her father's home in Azania had high, impregnable walls; Elmina stood nestled in the black rock mountains; and Cairo rose majestically by the sea. But Niani was open, with old buildings, its people different. Many had pink skin and white hair, unlike anyone Adia had seen.

"They're albinos," Hod explained. "They're born like you, but without melanin. Some places see them as a curse, an abomination."

"Like the twins?" Adia asked.

"Yes. Albino families may choose to abandon their children or keep them, depending on their beliefs. But with twins, it's the law. Death or exile beyond the wall—they can't live among the kingdoms of Alkebulan."

Niani was filled with albinos, young and old, many of them crippled or deformed. Some called it the 'city of the damned.' Yet among them lived people with dark skin—traders, criminals, the homeless, and prostitutes.

“We’re here,” Hod said.

They stood before a pleasure house. Adia had never seen one.

“What is this place?” she asked, noticing Ayana’s men stationed outside. She recognized them—they always traveled with her aunt. A few women lingered by the entrance, casting glances at Hod.

“You come here often, don’t you?” Adia asked.

“A man has desires, little bird,” Hod replied.

“What kind of desires?”

“Men’s desires. You wouldn’t understand—you’re still a child.”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Sixteen is still a child,” he said, unfazed.

“No, it’s not!”

“Have you bled yet?” he asked bluntly.

“What? No…”

“Then you’re still a child.”

As they ascended the stairs, Adia caught glimpses of naked prostitutes, some kissing each other, and heard muffled moans from behind closed doors. She paused, realizing what was happening.

“They’re making love,” she thought, listening more intently.

“Don’t mind them, keep moving,” Hod urged.

Adia had never experienced love-making and wondered what it felt like. Kofi often demonstrated how she did it with her albino boyfriend, while Abena said it was painful at first, but sweet after a few times.

“Keep up, little bird,” Hod called back to her.

“Is it pain or pleasure?” Adia wanted to ask, but the words stuck in her throat. “Kofi says it’s the best feeling a woman can ever have,” she remembered, thinking of her friends’ stories.

The wooden stairs creaked as they ascended to a hidden room. Two of Ayana’s men stood guard at the door, swords strapped to their hips. Adia recognized their faces—they were the guards who had come with them from Elmina.

Inside, Ayana waited. At the sight of her niece, she pulled her into a tight embrace. Hod stepped out and closed the door behind them, sealing off the rest of the world.

“What’s going on, Auntie?” Adia stammered, the carefree daydream of finding a boyfriend a distant memory.

Ayana’s face was drawn and pale. “I’m so sorry, child,” she said, her voice strained. “We have to leave. Now. I’ll explain everything on the way.”

Adia’s heart pounded. “But… the Lord Chancellor? What about my things, my friends?”

“There’s no time, Adia,” Ayana said, her voice steady but her hands trembling. “The Lord Chancellor is dead, and they’ll be coming for us next. I won’t let that happen.”

The weight of Ayana's words hit Adia like a hammer. Just a fortnight ago, her biggest worry had been finding a boyfriend. Now, she was a fugitive, running for her life.

"Who are 'they'?" Adia demanded. But before Ayana could respond, Hod burst in.

"We must go. Soldiers have been spotted on the road."

By the next day, it all felt like a fevered dream. They had ridden through Kano and over the Mbasa hills, guided by Ayana's plan. Days earlier, her aunt had told her, "We're not going back to Elmina."

"But Elmina is home," Adia had protested.

"We can't trust anyone there. Only my sister—your mother—can help us."

"Azania is too far away," Adia complained, exhausted and sore.

"We're going to Memphis," Ayana replied, her voice edged with determination. "I trust the king there is still honorable."

They rode on in silence, the gravity of their situation settling over them. Hours passed before Adia spoke again, this time to mutter about the ache in her stomach. Beyond them was the village, or what remained of it.

It was the first village they had seen since leaving Kano Hod and Dere had scouted ahead to make certain there was no one lurking amongst the ruins. Sliding in and amongst oaks and guava trees with their sword and spear in hand, they startled three deer and sent them bounding away through the brush.

“We’ll rest here for the night,” Hod announced at last,

No one had lived in the village for long years, Adia could see. All the houses were falling down. Even the inn. It had never been much of an inn, to look at it, but now all that remained was a stone chimney and two cracked walls, set amongst a dozen guava trees. One was growing up through the common room, where a layer of wet brown leaves and rotting guavas carpeted the floor. The air was thick with the smell of them, a cloying cidery scent that was almost overwhelming. Dere stabbed a few guavas with his spear, trying to find some still good enough to eat, but they were all too brown and wormy.

Ayana’s men took up positions around the deserted village, keeping a vigilant watch. Adia and Ayana walked down to the riverbank to wash up, one of the guards trailing them.

“You can wait here, Dere,” Ayana told him with a wave, her tone soft but firm.

Alone by the river, Ayana glanced over at her niece. “You’re a woman now, Adia. Isn’t that exciting?”

Exciting? Adia could hardly think of a worse time. Becoming a woman while running for her life felt like a cruel joke. She wanted to shout, I don’t want this, but the words lodged in her throat. All she wanted was to be back home, soaking in a hot bath filled with ointments and flowers, her curls spread over the feathered pillows of her own bed.

But that was a wish she couldn’t have—not now. Not while she was fleeing into the unknown.

Adia stared at the dark red stain on her dress, a harsh reminder of womanhood arriving amidst chaos. The flight from the capital, spurred by the Lord Chancellor's death, had overshadowed this turning point. Fourteen days on the run had etched new realities onto her life. The once-cherished dress was a symbol of a lost life, now stained with blood and dust. Discomfort gnawed at her — sore legs from relentless walking, the ever-present grime, a stark contrast to her sheltered past.

"You don't have to worry so much. We'll be safe," Ayana said, offering her another dress. It wasn't the linen and silk she was accustomed to; it was a commoner's garb, a dress that wouldn't mark her as highborn. Her aunt walked ahead to the village, and Adia followed.

The sun was sinking, and soon darkness settled around them. Hod and the men made a fire within the inn and began to tell stories. Adia could still hear guavas falling to the ground outside, the creepy, irritating noise keeping her awake late into the night.

Sleep evaded her. Memories flickered like flames — her playful brothers, Hami and Jirani, her sharp-tongued sister Chiku, and her worried mother, Belkis. How much had they changed? A pang of guilt clawed at her. Belkis must be frantic.

"I'll be home soon," Adia whispered into the darkness, fierce determination replacing her despair. The road ahead was uncertain, but she wouldn't succumb to fear. A faint hope flickered — perhaps Memphis's men would be their salvation. Adia squeezed her eyes shut, willing

away the terror, clinging to the sliver of hope that guided them onward.

When her eyes opened, guava trees blocked the sun from hitting her face, though a few rays managed to reach the ground, littered with decaying guavas and leaves.

“The queen’s hounds will be sniffing out every refuge along the merchant roads,” Hod was saying to Ayana. “We must take the Serpent’s Spine, a treacherous path through the foggy hills, if we are to reach Memphis with our heads.”

A tremor of fear danced down Adia’s spine. The foggy hills were whispered to be a labyrinth of treacherous paths and lurking dangers. But the alternative — facing the queen’s relentless pursuit — felt like a sentence of death. With newfound resolve, Adia met her aunt’s gaze. The path ahead was fraught with peril, but they would face it together.

The rickety causeway that was part of the Serpent’s Spine groaned under their weight as they traversed the vast, swampy expanse. The air hung heavy with a damp chill, clinging to Adia’s skin like a second layer of clothing. The narrow path barely afforded space for them to walk single file, let alone set up camp. Forced to stay put along the treacherous causeway near the Widow Mountains, Adia found herself taking solace in a strange beauty.

A vibrant ribbon of wildflowers lined the causeway, their vivid colors a sharp contrast against the stagnant black water stretching endlessly towards the base of the mountains. Dense tangles of trees crowded the swamp’s

edges, their branches weighed down with clusters of luminous fungi that glowed faintly in the deepening twilight. Enormous flowers rose from the mud, some floating on the still water, their colors both alluring and unsettling, as though they thrived on decay.

But Adia knew the beauty masked a deadly threat. One wrong step off the causeway could lead to a swift demise — quicksand lay in hungry patches along the path, while unseen eyes lurked within the thickets and dark water. The men, hardened by experience, managed to catch a few lizards and a snake for their evening meal. Adia, however, found no appetite. Fear had taken root within her, gnawing at her resilience, its tendrils creeping further into her thoughts with each passing hour.

Sensing her niece’s unease, Ayana spoke in a low, comforting tone. “Don’t worry, child. We’ll be safe here. Your mother knows we’re on our way, and we’ll meet in Akan in a few days.”

Adia longed to believe her aunt’s assurances, but the sinister beauty of the swamp and the ever-present danger cast a long shadow over her hope. The Serpent’s Spine seemed to whisper promises of treachery, and though her body was exhausted, her mind refused to find rest.

As dawn bled into a sullen gray, Adia stirred awake to find their camp surrounded. Ayana, panic etched on her face, pleaded with the encircling figures. “Take me! It’s my fault! Let Adia go and I’ll face whatever you have planned.”

Adia’s gaze snagged on a sigil emblazoned on their worn banner: a lone frog perched amidst swirling vines. It was the symbol of the Jangu, a reclusive people known for their deep connection to the wilderness. But these weren’t the Jangu Adia knew – these were women. Weathered faces framed by tightly-woven braids, wielding weapons etched with age and purpose. They were the scattered clans of the Thwa tribe, and they had arrived like a silent storm, forming a tight circle around Ayana’s men.

Hod, ever vigilant, stood protectively in front of Adia, a small blade pressed into her hand. “They wouldn’t dare kill us, would they?” she whispered, a tremor of fear lacing her voice.

The leader of the Thwa, a woman with a face marred by countless wrinkles and a smile that promised nothing but pain, cackled. “Killing you, child, would be a kindness compared to what awaits.”

Ayana, desperate and defiant, interjected, “Is there anything you seek? Gold? Jewels? Name your price, and I’ll gladly pay it. Just let us pass.”

“Fine clothes,” the leader rasped, her eyes gleaming with a predatory hunger. “I’ll take your dress, fancy lady.”

Ayana scoffed. “Walking naked won’t do either of us any good. However, I do have a collection of fine silks back in the capital. If you allow us passage, I can arrange delivery.”

A snarl twisted the leader's face. "Tricks, are we? You think you can outsmart the Thwa?" The spear she held inched closer to Ayana's throat.

Just then, one of Ayana's men, fueled by a desperate rage, lunged at the leader. Before he could reach her, a flurry of movement and a sickening thud ended his attack. A heavy silence descended, broken only by the ragged breaths of the remaining men.

A new voice rose from the crowd, firm and chilling. "We may be women, but we are as fierce and strong as any man. Do not underestimate the Thwa."

A gasp rippled through the crowd as a young woman emerged from the throng. Unlike the other Thwa women, her skin was lighter, and her hair, a crown of intricate braids, cascaded down her back. A sword hung proudly at her hip, glinting in the morning light.

"I am Welete Wabi," she boomed, her voice carrying a note of authority. "I belong to the Oromo tribe. We rarely see outsiders on our land, and you certainly don't resemble traders. Speak truthfully. Why trespass on Thwa territory?"

Adia, her heart hammering against her ribs, stepped forward. "We seek safe passage to Adansi in Akan. We are willing to pay handsomely for your aid."

"Lies!" the crone shrieked, her voice laced with malice. "She speaks lies! Cut out her pretty eyes so she can see no more!"

Ayana, her chin held high despite the tremor in her voice, countered, "I am Ayana of Amhara, from the city

of Aswan. My sister, Belkis, is wife to Taha of the Azania tribe. We are kin to powerful families. Grant us passage, and you will be richly rewarded, gaining the favor of influential allies. But harm us, and you make enemies of my kin in the north. Choose wisely, Welete Wabi. Blinding me won't solve your problems."

Welete Wabi's gaze flickered between Adia and Ayana, her stoic expression unreadable. Finally, a slow smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Weapons," she declared, her voice resonating with a newfound purpose. "We need weapons."

A flicker of hope ignited in Ayana's eyes. "Weapons you shall have," she replied, the beginnings of a plan forming in her mind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHIKU

Azania had branded her "Chiku the Goatface," a cruel moniker that had clung to her like a second skin. Though she endured it with stoic indifference, her brothers, Hami and Damu, had recently taken to calling her something far worse: "tomboy." Unlike the childhood nicknames she had shrugged off, this one felt like a searing brand on her soul. It wasn't just a word; it was a judgment, one that seemed to cut deeper than any insult she had faced before.

She didn’t fully understand why it stung until Akina, her older cousin, explained the meaning. The word set off a cascade of doubts in Chiku’s young mind, especially as she watched the women of Azania—chests full, backs straight, their movements graceful and commanding in ways she could not replicate. A seed of dissonance took root in her heart. Was she truly a boy trapped in a girl’s body? Was there something wrong with the way she was?

“Eight is young,” her mother, Belkis, would say with a tired smile whenever Chiku voiced her frustrations. “Your curves will come with the changing seasons, just as they did for me.” But her mother’s words offered little comfort. They felt like empty promises that carried no weight against the ever-growing awareness of her own difference.

Chiku craved something more visceral, more tangible than what her mother could offer. She longed for the rough camaraderie of the stable boys, who wrestled pigs in the mud and wielded spears with the clumsy enthusiasm of youth. In the nearby village, she found a kinship with boys who let her join their games of swordplay and archery. Their laughter and unguarded acceptance made her feel alive, unburdened by the questions that followed her at home.

But in Azania, she was an anomaly—a discordant note in the melody of Belkis and Zahur’s children. Whispers followed her like shadows in the corridors of their compound and in the village beyond, some soft with pity, others sharp with judgment. “Goatface” was no longer just a childhood taunt but a convenient shorthand for her

difference, a label that set her apart from her siblings. And yet, even among the whispers and sneers, Chiku's heart yearned for something greater. She craved the clang of steel on steel, the thrill of mock battles held in the practice yard, the sense of purpose and strength she saw in the soldiers and warriors of Azania.

"I want to go to practice with Damu and Hami," she had told Belkis once, her voice insistent. "They'll teach me how to use a sword."

But Belkis's disapproval was swift and uncompromising. "That is not the place for you," she had said, the conversation ending with the finality of a slammed door.

When her appeals failed, Chiku sought refuge in the armory's balcony, a narrow perch above the bustling yard where soldiers sparred daily. From this hidden vantage point, she became a silent observer, clutching her wooden sword—its grip too large for her small hands—and mimicking the movements of the fighters below. She practiced in secret, her gaze following every parry and strike with meticulous focus. Each day spent in the balcony only deepened the chasm between who she was and who others expected her to be. That gap, impossible to bridge, threatened to swallow her whole.

But here, far from Azania, in the untamed lands of Kirua, there was no one to stop her. Damu was too preoccupied with charting their course through the unfamiliar terrain, and Akina seemed content so long as Chiku stayed within sight. Even so, Akina's voice often rang out with caution, tinged with a worry Chiku couldn't fully understand.

“Don’t wander too far, Chiku,” Akina called one afternoon as the group trudged deeper into Kirua territory.

For hours, they had followed the faint, winding trail of the poacher’s run, a gamble Damu had convinced the others to take in the hope of eventually reaching a friendly town. Akina, ever the pragmatist, had voiced her doubts from the start.

“Leaving the river was a mistake,” she said that morning, her voice tight. “Crossing into the Naiva kingdom would’ve been simpler.”

“That doesn’t help, Akina,” Damu retorted, weariness lacing his tone. “We need a map, not regrets.”

Their bickering faded into the background for Chiku, whose attention had already wandered. The forest around them was a vast, untamed world that seemed to stretch on forever, its towering trees standing like silent sentinels. Curiosity, relentless and uncontainable, drove her forward, away from the main group. She flitted from one wonder to the next—the gnarled branches of ancient trees, the faint outlines of abandoned homes, their walls whispering tales of lives long forgotten.

But the further westward they traveled, the more unforgiving the landscape became. Cultivated fields gave way to dense, primeval forests. Hills rose sharply, and valleys plunged deeper than Chiku had ever seen. Food, once plentiful, grew scarce.

Damu, ever resourceful, relied on Kito and Thimba, two boys who had grown up under the care of a kennel

master in Azania. With the sharp instincts of hunters, they would vanish into the woods at dawn and return at dusk with whatever the forest offered—a deer, a handful of rabbits, or fish glistening on a string. The forest, which had once been a playground for Chiku's boundless curiosity, now carried an undercurrent of danger. She felt it in the sharp tension of the group, in the wary glances exchanged between Damu's men.

The men—Fish-neck, Chacha, Towila—were a motley crew, hardened by necessity. When food dwindled, they became bold foragers, scaling fences and raiding abandoned gardens for fruit: mangoes, oranges, pineapples. Damu's mission, however, was singular—to find a map, a lifeline out of the treacherous Kiruan wilderness.

One day, while exploring the edge of the camp, Chiku stumbled upon a plump black rabbit with patchy white spots. Its nose twitched as it nibbled at the grass. "Mine!" she whispered to herself, gripping her stick tightly. With a swift strike, she caught it before it could dart away. She returned to camp triumphant, the rabbit swinging by its ears, only to find the clearing eerily quiet. Most of the men were gone, and Akina was hunched over her half-ruined book, her lips moving silently as she tried to salvage its fragile pages.

Bahati, the largest of the group, took the rabbit from Chiku with a grunt of approval. That evening, he prepared a simple stew with foraged mushrooms and wild onions. The meal was sparse, and the hours that followed stretched endlessly, heavy with boredom.

Driven by restlessness, Chiku approached Bahati, who sat sharpening his axe on a wet stone.

“Bahati,” she began, her voice small but firm. “Will you teach me how to fight?”

The giant’s booming laugh echoed through the camp. “Fight? Why, Goatface, you’re barely out of your swaddling clothes!”

“I want to be strong,” Chiku insisted, squaring her shoulders. “Like Damu. Like Mama.”

Akina, looking up from her book, interjected sharply. “Mother wouldn’t approve of this, Chiku.”

“But Mother isn’t here,” Chiku countered, her chin lifting defiantly. “Bahati can teach me. She wouldn’t even know.”

Akina sighed, her exasperation clear. “And why do you want to fight, anyway?”

Chiku’s eyes lit up with the fire of a dream. “I want to be a lion-riding warrior. Lion riders are strong. They’re brave, like in your stories.”

Akina hesitated, the weight of Chiku’s words settling over her. The lion riders of the Abyssinian legends—fierce warriors astride great beasts—had been heroes of myth, the kind of figures Chiku clung to with desperate belief.

“Not everything in books is real,” Akina said finally, her voice gentler now.

“So your books lie?” Chiku shot back, her tone sharp.

“I’m not saying that,” Akina replied, the beginnings of a weary smile playing at her lips. “But you’re too young for this kind of violence.”

“Too young,” Chiku muttered under her breath. Frustration flickered in her eyes as she turned away, the words echoing in her mind like a taunt. Patience was not something she possessed, nor something she wanted. The whispers of rebellion grew louder in the quiet of the forest, a promise of something greater waiting just beyond the horizon.

Bahati’s smile softened, his gaze thoughtful as he looked at Chiku. For a moment, he said nothing, only studying her with a quiet understanding that made her heart skip. His towering frame, broad and steady, seemed to contrast entirely with the wiry determination of the small girl in front of him. Finally, he nodded.

“All right, Goatface,” he murmured, his tone half teasing but laced with approval. “Show me what you’ve learned, what you’ve been practicing on that balcony.”

Chiku’s heart leapt at his words, her chest swelling with pride. He had seen me, she thought, gripping her stick so tightly her fingers began to ache. He knew I’d been watching the soldiers, mimicking their swordplay in secret.

Without another word, Bahati picked up a stick of his own. It was roughly the same size as the one Chiku held, though the way it fit in his enormous hand made it look like a toothpick. He stepped back, crouching slightly, and pointed the stick toward her with a playful smirk.

“Now, show me.”

Chiku hesitated for only a moment before lunging at him with all the energy her small body could muster. She jumped from side to side, her feet moving quickly but without rhythm, swinging her stick in wide arcs. Bahati moved easily, his reflexes honed by years of combat. Every time she tried to strike him, he blocked her attacks with the ease of swatting away a fly. The sound of wood meeting wood echoed through the camp, and with every failed attempt, Chiku grew more frustrated.

“You have to think before you swing,” Bahati said, chuckling as he sidestepped her clumsy attack. “Don’t just jump around like a chicken that’s lost its head.”

Chiku gritted her teeth, her face set in fierce determination. She adjusted her grip on the stick and tried again, this time aiming for his legs instead of his torso. But Bahati was too quick, his stick sweeping hers aside with a casual flick of his wrist.

“You’re strong, little one,” he said, his voice encouraging. “But strength is nothing without control.”

Before Chiku could respond, a restless energy crackled in the air, so sudden and sharp that it made her pause mid-swing. The sensation was like a ripple in still water, subtle yet impossible to ignore. Her grip tightened on the stick as her instincts flared.

“Something’s coming!” she announced, her voice cutting through the stillness like the snap of a branch.

Akina looked up sharply from her books, her brow furrowing. “What are you talking about, Chiku?” she asked, her tone half dismissive. “There’s nothing—”

“Something’s coming!” Chiku repeated, her voice rising with urgency. Her eyes darted to the edge of the clearing, scanning the dense foliage that surrounded them. Bahati straightened, his playful demeanor evaporating in an instant.

Akina closed her book, the damp pages forgotten as she rose to her feet, her hand moving instinctively to the small dagger strapped to her belt. Her eyes swept the treeline, searching for the source of Chiku’s unease. “I don’t see anything,” she said softly, but her voice betrayed the flicker of unease creeping into her chest.

Bahati turned his gaze to the forest, his grip tightening on the double-headed axe that had been resting against the tree stump beside him. The gnarled wood of the axe handle looked rough and splintered, but in his hands, it was an extension of his own power. His dark eyes, usually warm and gentle, now burned with fierce protectiveness. Chiku watched the transformation with awe, noting how his entire stance shifted, every muscle in his body tensing like a coiled spring.

The forest fell silent, an unnatural stillness descending over the clearing. Even the birds, whose songs had filled the air just moments before, had gone quiet. Chiku’s heart hammered against her ribs, her breath coming in quick, shallow bursts.

And then she saw it.

The first shadow emerged from the undergrowth, moving with a predatory grace that sent a chill down her spine. Its shape was human, but there was something about the way it moved—slow, deliberate, as if it knew the fear it inspired—that made her blood run cold. A second figure followed, then another, and another, until they seemed to materialize from every direction, surrounding the camp like a pack of wolves closing in on their prey.

Slave catchers.

Chiku had heard stories of them whispered in the markets of Azania, tales of men who prowled the borders of forgotten kingdoms, hunting the lost and the desperate. Their faces were etched with cruelty, their clothes worn and ragged, yet their movements were disciplined, calculated. Each one carried weapons—curved swords, spears, nets—tools of their grim trade.

Akina stiffened, her hand flying to Chiku’s arm and pulling her close. “Stay behind me,” she hissed, her voice low but fierce.

Chiku resisted, her feet planted stubbornly in the dirt. She clutched her makeshift sword—a gnarled stick she’d picked from the forest floor earlier—and raised it in trembling hands. She was no soldier, no warrior, but the fire inside her refused to be extinguished. She would not cower.

Bahati stepped forward, placing himself between the women and the advancing figures. He raised his axe, its twin blades gleaming faintly in the dappled sunlight. The muscles in his arms bulged like knotted tree roots, his imposing frame blocking Chiku’s view of the slave

catchers. He spoke then, his voice low and rumbling like distant thunder.

“This is not your fight, little one,” he said, glancing back at Chiku. “Stay where it’s safe.”

“No!” Chiku’s voice cracked, but she didn’t lower her stick. “I can fight. I’m ready.”

Bahati shook his head, a faint smile ghosting across his lips despite the tension in the air. “Courage is a fine thing, Goatface. But a lion knows when to roar and when to wait.”

Before Chiku could argue, the leader of the slave catchers stepped forward, his lips curling into a sneer. “You’re a long way from home, Dinka,” he said, addressing Bahati. His voice was rough, like gravel scraping against stone. “Hand over the girl and the woman, and we’ll let you live.”

Bahati didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he shifted his weight, his stance widening as he planted his feet firmly in the dirt. The tension in the air thickened, heavy and suffocating, as if the forest itself was holding its breath.

“You’ll take nothing from this camp,” Bahati said finally, his voice steady and unyielding. His grip on the axe tightened, and for the first time, Chiku understood the kind of strength that lived within him—not just the strength of his body, but the strength of his spirit.

The slave catchers exchanged glances, their weapons glinting menacingly as they stepped closer. Bahati raised his axe, and Chiku’s pulse quickened. She could feel the

storm brewing, the clash of steel and wood that was moments away.

But she wasn’t afraid.

Not anymore.

Akina instinctively pulled Chiku close, her arms a protective shield around her

Younger sister. Chiku, however, bristled against her grasp, her defiance as sharp as the stick she gripped tightly in her

Small hands. Her chin jutted out, her knuckles blacker.

“We have nothing of value for you,” Akina called out, her voice steady despite the fear coursing through her veins.

The leader of the slavers stepped forward with slow, measured strides, his greasy smile widening. Rings glinted on every finger, catching the dappled sunlight that broke through the canopy. His gaze swept over the trio like a predator eyeing its prey.

“On the contrary,” he drawled, his tone syrupy and mocking, “you have plenty. A dinka warrior!” His eyes lingered on Bahati, his expression darkening with greedy intent. “A rare find indeed. Strong skilled. You’ll fetch a handsome price.” Then his gaze shifted, landing on Chiku, a glint of avarice sparked in his eyes.

“And you,” he said, his voice softening with mock gentleness, “you’ll be unharmed, little one. I assure you.”

Chiku’s grip tightened on her stick, her heart pounding as fury rose in her chest.

The weight of his gaze made her skin crawl, but she refused to shrink back.

Before Bahati could respond, the clearing erupted with a guttural war cry. It burst from Bahati’s throat like a primal thunderclap, shaking the very air around them. It was the sound of generations of warriors, of battles fought and won, of unyielding defiance in the face of death.

With a speed that defied his size, Bahati launched himself at the nearest slaver.

The man barely had time to blink before the axe swung down in a deadly arc, finding its mark with devastating precision. The blade cleaved him from shoulder to hip, and the man collapsed in a spray of crimson. Chaos descended.

The clash of steel and the cries of battle filled the clearing as Bahati became a whirlwind of deadly force. His axes spun like extensions of his own body, their sharp edges slicing through the air with terrifying accuracy.

Each swing was a symphony of destruction. Blood spurted, painting the ground in dark rivulets. Slavers fell one after another, their cries silenced as Bahati cut through them like a farmer scything through wheat.

Chiku stood frozen, her wide eyes fixed on the carnage before her. Bahati was a force of nature, unstoppable and unrelenting.

She watched as his axe swept through limbs, severing them as easily as branches. Each splatter of blood, each

crumpled body, sent a jolt through her. But fear did not claim her.

Instead, something deeper, more primal, stirred within.

I am not just a skinny girl with a stick, the thought. I am a warrior in the making.

Chiku's chest heaved as she took a step forward, the urge to fight, to prove herself, rising like a flame. But before she could move any closer, the leader of the slavers acted. In the chaos, he surged forward, his movements quick and calculated.

Akina, too focused on Bahati's furious onslaught, didn't see him coming until it was too late. His rough hands yanked her back, and a wicked-looking knife appeared at her throat. Its blade glinted cruelly in the sunlight, a sharp, merciless line against Akina's skin.

"Stand down, Dinka," the leader snarled,

His voice dripping with venom. His sneer widened as Akina stiffened in his grip, her breath caught in her throat. "Or the girl gets it."

The battlefield fell into a sudden, unnatural silence. Bahati froze mid-swing, his broad chest heaving, his axes dripping with blood. His dark eyes darted to Akina, the sight of the blade against her neck sending a shockwave through him.

Chiku, too, was still. The stick in her hands felt heavier than ever as she

Stared at her sister’s pale face, at the cruel smile twisting the slaver’s lips. Her heart thundered, her grip tightening, but her feet felt rooted to the ground.

Bahati’s gaze flicked between the leader and Akina, his mind racing.

The forest around him faded into a suffocating silence. The clang of steel, the roar of his war cry, the cries of the dying-everything vanished. All that remained was the glint of the knife, the terrified look in Akina’s eyes, and the slavers beginning to regroup around their leader.

The warrior’s fury in Bahati’s chest warred with something else-something stronger, deeper. It was the need to Protect it was the same need that had made him stay with the girls in this godforsaken forest, the same need that made him feel responsible for their safety above all else.

“Make the right choice, Dinka,” the slaver leader purred, his voice dripping with false charm. “You’ve caused enough trouble for one day. Stand down, and perhaps the girls won’t be... inconvenienced.”

The slaver’s grin widened as he dragged the blade slightly across Akina’s skin, drawing a thin line of blood. Akina gasped, her eyes wide with panic, but she didn’t cry out.

Chiku took a step forward, her movements slow but deliberate. The fire in her chest burned hotter, the spark of rebellion threatening to burst into flame. She was done waiting. Done cowering.

Bahati caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. “No, goatface,” he growled under his breath, the warning clear in his tone. But Chiku ignored him.

“Let her go!” she shouted, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and fury. She raised her stick, gripping it like a blade. Her entire body vibrated with energy, her heart hammering so hard she thought it might burst from her chest.

The slaver leader laughed, his gaze shifting to the small, defiant girl standing before him. “What’s this?” he sneered. “A lion cub baring her teeth?”

Bahati’s voice cut through the air like a whip. “I’ll kill you before you can even touch her,” he said, his tone so cold it made the slavers pause. The leader’s cruel smile faltered for a fraction of a second, but he recovered quickly, pressing the knife harder against Akina’s throat. “Enough posturing, Dinka. Drop your weapons, or she dies.”

Bahati hesitated, his mind a storm of calculations and fears. His fingers twitched on the axe handle, his instincts screaming to attack, to end this. But Akina’s life hung in the balance, and the wrong move would cost her everything.

Chiku’s knuckles turned blacker around her stick. Her sister’s trembling form, Bahati’s tense frame, the mocking slavers-all of it blurred together as one thought took root in her mind: I won’t let this happen. Not now She stepped forward, her body taut as a drawn bow, her stick raised. And this time, she was ready to roar.

In that agonizing moment, a horrifying realization dawned on Bahati. He was outnumbered, Akina was under the slavers knife Chiku was trying to be brave but she was just a little girl playing hero.

A fresh wave of fury surged through him, threatening to drown the fear. But amidst the storm, a single, primal instinct roared – protect Akina protect Chiku. With a choked sob, Bahati lowered his axe, it's clatter echoing the shattering of his warrior spirit.

The leader's smile widened, revealing a row of predatory teeth. He barked orders, and two burly slavers surged forward, grabbing Bahati's powerful arms and wrenching the axe from her grasp. A searing pain lanced through his shoulders, a taste of copper filling his mouth.

Tears welled in Chiku's eyes as the slavers snatched the stick away from her. Her protector, the mighty Bahati, was brought low, her defiance extinguished. A whimper escaped her lips, and the slaver leader's gaze snapped towards her.

A cruel amusement flickered in his eyes. "Ah, the little warrior wannabe. Perhaps you'll fetch a decent price after some... training."

Rough hands grabbed Chiku, hauling her away from Akina's trembling form. Panic, raw and primal, flooded her. This wasn't a game of swinging sticks in the balcony. This was real, and the stakes were terrifyingly high.

As the slavers shoved her towards the waiting horses, a primal scream ripped from her throat. It wasn't a cry of

defiance, but a desperate plea for survival. In that moment, the adventurous, rebellious Chiku, the girl who yearned to be a warrior, was gone. In her place stood a terrified little girl, stripped bare of her bravado, clinging to the fragile hope that somehow, she would survive this nightmare.

CHAPTER NINE

DAMU

Within the sixteen kingdoms of Alkebulan, a cruel law reigned. Every child born a twin faced death or exile. Chieftains across the land enforced this decree, ensuring no twins survived within their borders. Mothers of twins bore the mark of shame, and in southern tribes – zulu, Somali, Thonis, Gondo, and Kasala – even harsher punishments befell them and their families.

Damu lived with the constant threat of this law. He knew his father, the Chieftain, would eventually honor it, separating him from his twin sister, Akina. Every passing year fueled his anxiety, for Damu was nearing adulthood, making a decision ever more difficult.

From the age of eight, Damu trained under Rhoko, Azania master-at-arms. Zahur, by his father’s decree, had Rhoko hone Damu’s skills in swordsmanship, archery, horsemanship, and the art of war. “Be prepared,” Rhoko would say, leaving the true purpose veiled.

Perhaps Damu was being readied for a life beyond the kingdoms: the sprawling lands beyond the wall, the

Songhi cities, the lands beyond the Redlands, or the free cities of Alkushan. “I’ll go to the free cities, where twins are welcome,” he’d often confide in his friends. “The islands of Shugo, Doho, Ghiri... Khushani lands... what wonders lie there?” These dreams fueled his hope, a flicker against the darkness of his uncertain future, a future dictated by his father, the Chieftain of Azania.

Damu’s illiteracy was a disadvantage, but his charisma and fighting prowess more than compensated. He devoured stories from his twin sister, Akina, especially tales of the fallen Khushani kingdom. Akina described a land of majestic mountains, cascading waterfalls, and pristine beaches, all tragically lost. Damu yearned to see these wonders for himself.

At fifteen, during his lord father’s birthday tournaments, Damu’s exceptional skills shone. He disarmed his master-at-arms in front of a crowd of chieftains, earning a place as a soldier in his father’s clan.

Despite his martial talents, Damu possessed a kind heart, attracting a loyal following of outcasts and lowborns. This unlikely band, including pygmies from the Beja tribe, warriors from Dinka and Shilluk tribes, and others, followed Damu wherever he led.

Damu’s ragtag group of thirteen had been through much together. They had followed him to the Chif Zenga tourney, where his skill with a blade had drawn the admiration—and envy—of rival chieftains. They had stood by his side on Akina’s quest for knowledge at the lighthouse, though their journey had been cut short when their ship crashed against the jagged rocks of the

southern coast. Now, scattered and weary, they trudged through the depths of the Kirua woods, their purpose murky and their hope thinning. The safety of Akina and young Chiku rested in their hands, yet the path forward seemed as impenetrable as the ancient trees around them.

For three days, he and his band of thirteen had wandered the vast Kirua woods, searching for signs of civilization. The trees loomed above them, ancient and unyielding, their twisted branches blocking out the sun. These woods felt timeless, untouched—trees that no axe had ever marred.

Villages, or what was left of them, offered no hope. Stone walls were cloaked in moss, roofs collapsed, streets silent. Each ruin told the same story: abandonment. Damu had stopped trying to name the places they passed. Akina would know what this village was called, he thought. She always remembered the old maps and their stories, but now she was far away, waiting with Chiku in the ruins of a crumbling castle.

He had left them there, thinking it was the safest option. Batho and Bahati, his most loyal men, had stayed behind to guard them. Damu’s mission was simple: find a map, or a village that still lived, or even just a horse and a rider who could point them toward their destination. But the woods had offered nothing. Only faint footpaths, campfires cold for six days or more, and hoofprints that led them astray for an entire day before vanishing into the undergrowth.

Now, even Damu’s resolve was beginning to waver. He felt the weight of every decision—every promise he had made to his sister, to his group, to himself. What if I’ve led us all to ruin?

“We won’t find anything out here,” Chacha muttered, breaking the heavy silence. His voice was low, edged with frustration. “We need to turn back before the woods swallow us too.”

Damu glanced at the older man, but said nothing. He couldn’t admit that Chacha might be right. Instead, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword and pressed forward. “We’ll find something,” he said, more to himself than to his men. “We have to.”

Upon returning to the castle ruins, they found only Betho waiting for them, his face pale and his hands trembling.

“I found bodies,” he said, his voice hollow. “But I must have been too late.”

A chill ran through Damu’s group, the weight of his words sinking in.

“Yeah, that’s obvious,” Chacha muttered in a tongue unfamiliar to most of the group, though his bitterness needed no translation.

Damu stepped forward, his eyes burning. “You were supposed to be with them. Where were you?”

Betho looked down, guilt written all over his face. “Everything seemed fine when I left. Bahati said they’d be safe, so I… I went to find food. I thought I’d only be gone a few hours.”

“When was this?” Damu’s voice was low but sharp, each word a blade.

“Two nights ago,” Betho admitted. “I followed tracks into the hills, just south of here. I thought I’d find game, but when I came back…” His voice cracked, and he shook his head.

Damu felt the blood drain from his face. His mind raced as the weight of Betho’s mistake settled in. Two nights. That meant whoever—or whatever—had taken Akina and Chiku was long gone. And Bahati… if he had fought to protect them, he was likely dead.

“We leave. Now,” Damu said, his voice ironclad.

The group gathered their gear in silence. The sun dipped behind the mountains, casting long, jagged shadows across the forest. As they set off toward the hills, Damu’s mind burned with fury and fear. He would find them. No matter what it took, he would bring Akina and Chiku back—or die trying.

It rained all through the day, and by nightfall, Monkey Face was shaking with chills. They couldn’t stop, not even for him. They ran through the storm, the cold rain soaking their clothes and sapping their strength. By morning, everyone was weary and starving.

Betho prepared cassava porridge over a hastily built fire, the smoky smell turning their stomachs. When they complained, he scowled. “The wood was wet,” he grumbled, his tone as bitter as the meal.

Monkey Face sat slumped against a tree, feverish and shivering. His breaths came shallow and uneven, and his sweat-drenched shirt clung to his thin frame.

“We need to pick up the pace,” Damu announced, his voice sharp and commanding.

Chacha shot him a skeptical glance. “And what about Monkey Face?”

Damu turned to him, crouching down so they were eye level. Monkey Face’s face was pale, and his teeth chattered as he tried to steady his breathing.

“Can you manage?” Damu asked, his tone softened just enough to sound like a leader speaking to his comrade, not his subordinate.

Monkey Face straightened slightly, his jaw tightening. “Yes. I can manage,” he said through gritted teeth. “Let’s go.”

Damu studied him for a moment, as if weighing his words. Then he nodded and stood. “Good. Keep up.”

Monkey Face struggled to his feet, swaying for a moment before steadying himself. The others watched him in silence, their expressions a mixture of doubt and quiet admiration. No one said anything—they didn’t need to.

“Let’s move,” Damu ordered, turning away.

Grief gnawed at his insides, but a fierce determination burned brighter. He couldn’t fail his sisters. Akina and Chiku were out there, scared and alone. Every moment counted.

The group gathered their things and set off into the dripping forest. Monkey Face trudged alongside them, his breath labored but his steps steady. The rain had eased, but the ground was still slick, and the cold clung to them like a second skin. As the sun began to rise, its weak light barely piercing the canopy, Damu pushed them harder. He wouldn't let fear take root—not now.

It had been a day's run before they stumbled upon an abandoned village. The scattered, grass-thatched houses were in ruin, their roofs sagging with decay. Some of the huts were scorched, reduced to little more than circles of decorated walls, now overgrown with weeds. The air was heavy with the smell of damp earth and rot, a silence hanging over the place that felt unnatural.

"This was a village full of people," muttered Monkey Face, his feverish voice subdued. "What happened to them?"

"Perhaps they migrated," said the Pygmy, stepping lightly over the mossy ground. "My people migrated all the time."

"Did you have kin here?" teased Monkey Face, a faint smirk crossing his lips. "I never knew short people lived in these hills."

The Pygmy shot him a sharp glance. "I am a Pygmy. My kin live in the mountains—do you see mountains here?"

"Exactly my point," Monkey Face said, shrugging. "Like my people live in the trees, yours live in the mountains. But these Kirua people—flatlanders—they lived on hills

and plains. Vulnerable. Easy prey for raiders and slavers."

Monkey Face's tone darkened on the last word, and the group fell silent for a moment. The decaying huts suddenly seemed heavier with memory and loss.

Damu and Chacha had wandered toward the river that cut through the swamp at the edge of the village. The water was sluggish and brown, reeds growing thick along the banks.

"Look," Chacha said, pointing. A thick rope was tied across the river, the knots frayed but still holding fast. "I think that's how they crossed."

Damu nodded, his jaw tightening. "Then we cross too. Any longer we delay, my sisters are in great danger."

Without waiting for the others, he strode toward the rope. The urgency in his voice left no room for argument.

The river wasn't deep for Damu and most of the group, but for the Pygmy, the water rose nearly to his chest. He couldn't reach the rope for support, so Monkey Face hoisted him onto his shoulder like a child.

The Pygmy's protests came immediately. "Put me down! I'm not a boy!" he snapped, squirming indignantly.

Ali smirked. "You're not a boy—you're smaller!"

Despite his irritation, the Pygmy clung tightly as they crossed. Once on the other side, he leapt down, brushing himself off and muttering curses. Monkey Face only laughed, the sound cutting briefly through the tension that shadowed their journey.

They picked up the trail on the other side, following faint traces through the trees for half a day. Whenever the tracks vanished, they rested, their energy waning with each setback. Chacha or Betho, or Towila sharp-eyed and experienced trackers, always managed to find the trail again, pulling the group back to their relentless quest.

It was the Pygmy who found the next trace—a path leading north. For three hours, they followed it with growing hope, only to have it vanish once again near the coiled bends of Snake River.

“That’s it,” Monkey Face grumbled, throwing up his hands. “I’m not following him again. He’ll have us walking through mountain holes next!”

The group laughed weakly, though their frustration simmered beneath the surface.

The Pygmy claimed to be the illegitimate son of Chief Rah of the Pygmy Mountains, though his story always drew skeptical looks. He claimed his mother, a kitchen wench, had abandoned him on the very stone where she used to meet Chief Rah.

“Are you sure you weren’t born of a whore?” Bahati would tease every time the Pygmy told the tale.

“There are no whores in the Pygmy lands,” the Pygmy would reply defensively. “It’s an immoral act. All my life, I’ve never seen a short whore.”

“All your life, you’ve not seen a woman,” Chacha quipped, grinning. “All you do is sharpen your axe and drink yourself to sleep. One day, I’ll take you to the Half-

Moon Tavan on the islands of the Silver Fish clans. Plenty of your kind whoring for a coin."

"He knows where that is," Towila chimed in. "His only fear is he doesn't know who his mama is. He's afraid one of those short girls might turn out to be her!"

The group roared with laughter.

"Not just me," Towila added, grinning wide. "I'd be afraid too if I didn't know my mother. But, little man, I think I may have met your mama once."

The Pygmy shot him a dark look but said nothing.

"I've seen you 'mess with your kind,'" Ali, the self-styled Somali Prince, interjected with a smirk.

"Only the ones with maidenheads and under eighteen," Towila replied proudly, earning groans from the group.

The banter carried on as they stopped for a midday meal in a valley filled with guava and jackfruit trees. Shafts of sunlight pierced through the canopy, illuminating the ground, which was carpeted with rotting fruit. The smell of fermentation mixed with the buzz of mosquitoes.

Towila, distracted as usual, sat on what he thought was a rock, only to leap up with a yelp. His pants were smeared with the remnants of a decayed jackfruit, wriggling with maggots.

"I don't like it here," he grumbled, swiping at the mess on his clothes. "Too many mosquitoes and too much rotting fruit."

Chacha tossed him a ripe yellow guava. “And fresh ones, too,” he said, biting into his own, revealing its pink flesh and hard seeds.

Ali and the Pygmy returned triumphantly, carrying a snake and three large rabbits caught in a single burrow. As always, they roasted their catch. The Pygmy hacked off a piece of snake meat that had turned brown and crispy from the fire, the blackened edges where the smoke had hit.

Monkey Face had gone up the hill on Damu’s orders to scout the area. He sprinted back moments later, his face flushed with urgency.

“There’s a road!” he exclaimed. “South of here—recent horse tracks.”

Damu’s head snapped toward him, his eyes narrowing. “Are you sure?”

“A few leagues from here,” Monkey Face confirmed.

Relief, sharp and unexpected, rushed through Damu’s veins. A flicker of life in the desolate landscape of their search.

Three hours later, as the bright evening light bathed the horizon in gold, they crested a rise. The wind tugged at their leather cloaks, and a sight unlike any they’d encountered in these Kirua lands filled their vision.

A fortress, once magnificent, stood skeletal against the horizon. The crumbling towers rose like broken teeth, jagged and gray, against the deepening sky. It was a monument to another time, its grandeur long reduced to ruin.

“The abandoned fortress of the Blue Sharks,” Chacha murmured, his voice tinged with awe.

A ripple of unease passed through the group. The Blue Sharks—a name whispered in cautionary tales. They were a clan cloaked in legend, their stories darker than the forest they had left behind.

“Extinct people,” Akan, the youngest and most curious of the group, said in a hushed voice.

Tails, the self-proclaimed historian of their band, puffed out his chest. “Wiped out by the curse of the Night Dancer during the fabled battle of the gods.”

Ali scoffed. “Don’t listen to him. I heard the Red Priestess say they were ravaged by plague years ago.”

“Enough,” Damu said sharply, his voice cutting through the rising murmurs. Theories wouldn’t bring his sisters back. If answers existed, they lay within those crumbling walls.

“We check it out,” he commanded, his gaze fixed on the fortress. Grief mingled with a fierce determination in his voice. He didn’t wait for objections. His sisters’ lives depended on what they might find there.

The group fell in line behind him, their steps weighted with the unease of what lay ahead.

A crisp breeze rustled the leaves, the birdsong a faint melody beneath the howl of the wind that seemed to animate the forest itself. Yet Damu felt a coldness in his chest that had nothing to do with the air.

Ali drew his sword with a practiced motion, the metallic rasp breaking the uneasy silence. Towila followed suit, gripping his spear with both hands, his gaze fixed on the looming structure ahead.

The fortress stood skeletal against the clear sky, its crumbling walls a somber testament to an age long past. Above it, a dark green banner bearing a golden monkey flapped defiantly in the breeze.

Damu's heart sank at the sight. A knot of dread twisted in his stomach.

At the entrance of the gateless fortress, sentries stood stiff and watchful, their grim faces partially obscured by the shadows of their helmets. Their uniforms were unmistakable: the deep green and gold of the Berbers of Luxor, the royal warriors who swore allegiance to their mysterious and reclusive tribe.

"Halt!" barked a sentry, his voice cutting through the wind. His hand hovered over the hilt of his sword, poised to strike.

Damu raised a hand in a gesture of peace, though his other rested on his own weapon. "We come in peace," he called out, his voice steady despite the cold dread clawing at his insides. "We seek information. Two girls—one younger than the other. Perhaps you have seen them?"

His eyes swept the compound behind the guards, taking in the unsettling scene.

Berbers milled about the ruins, their flowing dark green tunics catching the light. Golden embroidery adorned the

fabric, forming intricate patterns around the image of a majestic monkey, the symbol of their clan. Each uniform was impeccably matched: fitted green pants tucked into knee-high leather boots, their buckles glinting in the sun. At their waists, golden sashes bore the unmistakable emblem of the Berbers, a mark of their loyalty to Luxor's royal family.

The sentries exchanged a look, their expressions inscrutable. Behind them, the stillness of the fortress radiated like a warning.

In contrast, the Slavers were a motley crew of battle-hardened warriors, each exuding a raw, violent energy that made Damu's stomach churn. Their mismatched armor—leather, chainmail, and scavenged remnants from other men's deaths—seemed almost a trophy of their brutal conquests. Damu's hand instinctively tightened around his sword hilt as his eyes moved from one to the next, his unease growing with every glance.

The leader stood at the front, a grizzled man clad in worn leather armor adorned with gleaming silver studs. He held a massive sword, its blade notched and scarred from countless battles. A fresh, bloody gash above his left eyebrow told of recent combat, but he carried it like a badge of pride. His cold, calculating gaze swept the clearing, stopping briefly on Damu. Their eyes met, and Damu felt the weight of the man's confidence, his aura of command. This is no mere raider, Damu thought. This is a killer who's survived everything thrown at him.

Beside him towered a man as dark as coal, his size alone enough to intimidate. The chainmail stretched taut over

his massive chest seemed to groan under the strain, and his hands gripped a greataxe as if it weighed nothing. A crude bandage on his left bicep, soaked through with blood, suggested the man had fought recently—and won. One of the Berbers was tending to the wound, his hands shaking slightly, and Damu couldn’t tell if the tremor came from the task or the man himself. He looked back at the giant and tried to suppress the creeping dread that clawed at his chest. How many men had fallen to that axe?

A sharp movement drew Damu’s attention. A lean woman with a scar above her right cheekbone carved an apple with a dagger, her movements slow and deliberate. Her supple leather armor was decorated with small, colorful beads, and gold, silver, and bronze bangles adorned her wrists, catching the sunlight with every slice of her blade. She popped a piece of apple into her mouth, her eyes flickering toward Damu as a faint smirk tugged at her lips. It wasn’t playful—it was taunting, predatory. Damu looked away, uneasy. She fights with her daggers the way she carves that apple, he thought grimly. Precise, ruthless.

To the side, a hulking man with cracked, sun-scorched skin adjusted the rings that decorated each of his fingers. The sheer number of them made Damu’s blood run cold. Rings of the dead? Rings of the enslaved? The man’s tattered robes and scavenged armor added to his monstrous appearance, and in his hands was a spear, its shaft polished smooth by years of deadly use. His dry, cracked lips twitched slightly as he glanced at the group, his expression unreadable.

Not far from him, a wiry man shifted restlessly, his leather armor jingling with the weight of tiny trinkets—charms, trophies, remnants of battles long past. His twin swords glinted in the sunlight, their slender blades looking almost delicate. A faint bruise marred his cheekbone, but the grin plastered across his face spoke of pride, not pain. Damu's grip on his sword tightened further. How many of these men wore their scars like trophies?

Finally, Damu's eyes fell on a hooded figure standing apart from the others. Draped in a flowing black cloak embroidered with subtle silver threads, the figure exuded an air of menace. His face was hidden in the deep shadows of his hood, but the faint rustling sound from within the cloak hinted at something concealed—something dangerous. In his hand was a slender dagger, its blade unnervingly clean, catching the sunlight like an unspoken threat.

Damu's heart pounded in his chest. Each of these warriors was dangerous alone, but together, they were something far worse. This is what my sisters might be up against? The thought was like a knife to his gut. Grief threatened to rise, but he pushed it down. There was no room for fear, no room for hesitation. He had to remain steady, had to believe they still had a chance to save Akina and Chiku.

Yet, as he looked at the Slavers, at the scars and weapons and cruel smiles that marked them, a grim certainty settled over him. They're predators. They take what they want, kill what they can't use, and leave nothing behind. If they have my sisters… He couldn't

finish the thought. Instead, he swallowed hard and forced himself to focus.

Damu’s breath hitched. One of the Berber soldiers sat apart from the others, engrossed in a book. Not just any book—it was Akina’s. The sight of it struck him like a blade to the chest. Its water-damaged edges, the leather cover darkened and warped, were unmistakable. It was the same book she had kept close at all times, soaked during the wreck of their ship. Fury surged in him, hot and consuming, battling the rising tide of terror clawing at his chest.

CHAPTER TEN

BOMANI

The clang of steel echoed through the courtyard, sharp and relentless. Bomani moved like a predator, his strikes calculated, his muscles coiled with precision. The sword in his hand was no longer a weapon—it was an extension of his will. He spun, parried, and lunged in a dance perfected over years of unrelenting practice. Each movement flowed seamlessly into the next, drilled into his body through blood, sweat, and scars.

His chest rose and fell with controlled breaths, the desert sun beating down on his inked skin, which glistened with sweat. Across his shoulders and arms, intricate tattoos told his story—the story of a Desert Warrior. Each geometric line marked strength,

resilience, and loyalty, a legacy carved into flesh by countless battles fought under Darko’s unyielding gaze.

As he trained, fragments of memory surfaced unbidden.

“Again, Bomani. Your opponent won’t wait for you to catch your breath,” Darko’s voice rang in his ears, stern and unrelenting.

He saw himself as a boy, struggling to lift a blade too heavy for his small hands. He stumbled often, and the lessons left bruises and scars that Darko never coddled. “Every scar is a lesson,” Darko had said, standing tall above him, his shadow long and foreboding.

By his teenage years, Bomani had grown into a formidable warrior, able to match Darko blow for blow. By twenty, he had surpassed his mentor in skill. Yet Darko’s words lingered, sharp as any blade: “Skill alone won’t make you a leader. Strength must be tempered with wisdom.”

Bomani struck a final blow against the wooden dummy before him, cleaving it cleanly in two. For a moment, he stood still, his breath coming in steady bursts. The familiar ache in his arms and sting of sweat in his eyes reminded him that he was alive, but when he looked around, the courtyard felt emptier than it ever had.

Wiping his brow, Bomani sheathed his sword and stepped into the open air.

The balcony of his home overlooked Ait Benhaddou, the city sprawling below like a living painting rendered in earthen hues. Leaning against the railing, he let his gaze sweep across the streets teeming with life.

Merchants called out their wares in a cacophony of voices, their stalls laden with colourful textiles, dates, and fragrant spices. Children darted through narrow alleys, their laughter mingling with the rhythmic clatter of hooves as camels and donkeys navigated the labyrinthine streets. Women with baskets balanced expertly on their heads moved with quiet grace, their robes swaying in time with their steps.

Above it all, the towering kasbahs stood watchful, their intricate geometric patterns glowing under the relentless sun. The city's architecture—crafted from sun-dried mud and hardened by time—seemed as eternal as the sands themselves.

Bomani's home stood apart from the other structures, its larger size and ornate details a testament to Darko's legacy. Built from the same earthen tones as the rest of Ait Benhaddou, the house exuded quiet strength. Subtle carvings adorned its thick walls, whispering of an unspoken history.

Inside, the cool shade was a refuge from the oppressive heat. The wooden beams overhead, polished smooth, cast soft shadows on the clay walls. Bright Berber rugs added bursts of colour to the muted interior, while low tables and cushions filled the central room—a space that had once been alive with Darko's booming laughter and the murmured camaraderie of warriors.

Bomani's own room was stark by comparison. A simple bed occupied one corner; its frame unadorned. A chest held his armor and weapons, each item meticulously arranged. In a small alcove, a few mementos stood as

silent witnesses to his past: a knife Darko had given him on his fifteenth birthday, a leather-bound book of maps, and a wooden carving of a lion, chipped and weathered with age.

But today, the house felt hollow. Darko’s presence, once so pervasive, was now a lingering shadow. Without him, the walls seemed narrower, the silence heavier.

Bomani turned back to the balcony, his eyes fixed on the endless horizon. The ring in his palm felt heavier than it had before, its intricate patterns catching the light and glinting like fire. Somewhere beyond that horizon lay the answers he sought—the truth behind the name Niss and the prophecy of “The One Who Breastfeeds the Sun.”

A faint breeze stirred the stillness, whispering of journeys yet to come.

He poured himself a drink from a clay jug on the low table, the water laced with herbs to quench his thirst. The tunic clinging to his damp skin was a simple garment, but it carried a stark contrast to the weight of his thoughts.

From the corner of the room, a voice broke the silence.

“How long do you plan to stand there brooding?”

Bomani turned sharply, surprised to find Tchamda seated in the reading chair. The older man leaned back, a book resting on his lap, its words indecipherable to Bomani. Beside him, a carved wooden staff topped with the figure of a chameleon rested against the wall—a symbol of adaptability and foresight.

“How long have you been here?” Bomani asked, setting his cup down.

“Long enough to read three chapters,” Tchamda replied, closing the book with deliberate care. Rising to his feet, he limped toward the curved table. Despite the slight hitch in his step, Tchamda exuded authority.

His black-and-gold toghu shimmered faintly in the dim light, its intricate embroidery catching the eye. A well-groomed beard peppered with silver framed his sharp features. His piercing eyes, full of amusement and calculation, seemed to see through Bomani, as though he could read every thought unspoken. A single gold ring bearing the image of a coiled serpent glinted on his finger, a quiet reminder of his cunning.

“Where have you been?” Bomani asked, his voice low. “It’s been three months.”

“You asked me to uncover the truth about ‘The One Who Breastfeeds the Sun,’” Tchamda replied, leaning casually against the table.

“And?” Bomani’s tone was impatient.

Tchamda glanced around. “Do you have any wine?”

“I don’t drink.”

“Your father did,” Tchamda said with a smirk. “Though I seem to recall you never left me enough for a second cup.”

“Tchamda.” Bomani’s voice carried a warning.

“Fine, fine.” Tchamda waved a hand dismissively. “It’s a myth, Bomani. A name whispered in songs and poetry.

What I uncovered points to the Niss era—also a myth, if you ask most scholars. But it’s a curious one.”

Before Bomani could press further, he called out, “Jengu!”

A young boy appeared in the doorway; his slight frame silhouetted against the light.

“Find some wine for my guest,” Bomani instructed.

Jengu nodded and disappeared into the shadows.

Tchamda’s lips curved into a smile. “You’ve become more generous with your wine since I last saw you.”

Bomani exhaled sharply, his patience wearing thin. “Enough games. What did you find?”

“I encountered a singer—a wandering bard—at a roadside tavern,” Tchamda began, setting his cup down with deliberate care. “A wiry man with a thin beard, his robes patched and fraying at the edges. His lute was no better—worn and battered—but his voice, Bomani…” He paused, his gaze distant, as if reliving the moment. “His voice carried the weight of centuries.”

Bomani remained silent, letting Tchamda weave his tale.

“For a coin, I’ll sing you the tale of the Lost House of Niss,” the man had said, plucking a few melancholy notes on his lute. I tossed him a coin without hesitation, and the song began—a mournful ballad of war and betrayal.”

Tchamda’s voice dropped into a low, rhythmic cadence, his words carrying the echoes of the bard’s tune:

“In the shadow of gods, a house once stood,

Blood of the divine, bound in mortal flesh…mortal flash…..

But envy burned bright, and the gods turned away,

Betrayal and fire took the House of Niss…House of Niss ”

He poured himself another drink, this time sipping more slowly. “The song spoke of a princess who fled the destruction—pregnant, her ship swallowed by the sea for three long years.” He chuckled dryly. “Of course, I don’t believe that part. No one survives a day beneath the sea, let alone three years. Not even the gods, if such beings existed.”

The imagery lingered in Bomani’s mind, though he suspected the bard’s tale was more poetry than fact. Still, it had planted a seed of curiosity, one that refused to wither.

His thoughts drifted back to another encounter, a month ago, in a dusty caravanserai. An aged merchant, poring over his wares, had shared a different fragment of the same tale.

“The Niss?” the merchant had said, his voice heavy with skepticism and intrigue. “Ah, you mean the half-god family. I’ve heard the stories. They say their bloodline was a threat to humanity itself—too powerful, too proud. The gods didn’t take kindly to Niss’s union with a human woman, and so his descendants were cursed.”

“Cursed how?” Bomani had pressed.

The merchant had shrugged, a sly smile playing on his lips. “Cursed? Gifted? Depends on who you ask. There’s a tale of a Khushani prince—Gama, I think they called him. They say no weapon in all of Alkebulan could harm him. The finest swordsman the tourneys had ever seen. They called him The Prince Killer.”

For a moment, the merchant had grown silent, his gaze drifting skyward as if searching for something beyond the clouds. Then, leaning closer, he had whispered, “They say not all were killed, you know. There’s talk of a princess. Pregnant. Escaped by the sea. Some even whisper of her child... children—twins—born with marks of the divine.”

Bomani had pressed him for more details, but the merchant had only shrugged again. “That’s all I know.”

One of the more tangible fragments had come from an old parchment he had purchased in a smugglers’ market. Its edges were brittle, the ink faded, but a few words remained legible:

“House of Niss. Bloodline of the Banished God. A princess fled the flames. Her children scattered.”

The rest of the document had been illegible, but one name had stood out: Khushaniss, the cold lands far to the south.

Tchamda’s voice pulled him back to the present.

“If you are truly the son of Gama, it means you are not the only one,” Tchamda muttered, his tone cautious. “The Niss were never solitary. They say the bloodline only bore twins—or more.”

Bomani turned sharply, his eyes narrowing. “Where did you hear that? From another tavern singer?”

Tchamda smirked, swirling the wine in his cup. “Not this time. That piece of knowledge isn’t common enough for a singer to put it to song.”

“Then where?”

“From this,” Tchamda said, retrieving a worn leather-bound book from his satchel. He slid it across the table. Its cover was unadorned, but its weight suggested significance.

Bomani picked it up, flipping through pages covered in symbols he couldn’t decipher. “What is this?”

“Khushaniss bloodline history. The only surviving record, written in their language. I bought it for a few pennies from a blind bookseller in Abyssinia. ‘It’s wasted on a blind man,’ he told me.”

“How can you read this?” Bomani asked, his brow furrowing as he scanned the indecipherable script.

Tchamda grinned, leaning back. “I can read anything, given time. And it gets more interesting. The book says the Niss married among themselves to preserve their divine blood. Gama was one of them—the last recorded in this lineage. His account ends at fifteen.”

Bomani’s grip tightened on the book before he set it down. He reached for a scroll on the table and unrolled it carefully. It was a map, its lines faded but still clear enough to show Alkebulan and the distant southlands. His finger traced the route from Ait Benhaddou to the

ocean and further south to where Khushaniss lay—a cold and distant land that seemed more myth than reality.

The scattered stories, the cryptic fragments—they all pointed in one direction: Khushaniss.

But the final piece, “The One Who Breastfeeds the Sun,” remained shrouded in mystery.

Tchamda studied Bomani’s expression. “I know that look,” he said quietly. “But once you take this road, there’s no turning back.”

Bomani exhaled heavily and leaned against the wall, his mind racing. He closed his eyes, faces flashing before him—an old bard, a skeptical merchant, a blind bookseller. Each encounter had added another thread to the tapestry of this story. But the tapestry was still incomplete.

The sunlight streaming through the window warmed the room, but a chill settled over Bomani. The answers he sought were out there, beyond the reach of comfort and familiarity.

He opened his eye and moved to the balcony. Ait Benhaddou stretched out before him, alive with the rhythm of daily life. Merchants shouted, children laughed, and the kasbahs stood tall and unyielding.

But Bomani’s gaze drifted past it all, to the horizon where the desert met the sky. Somewhere beyond lay the truth of his name, his lineage, and his purpose.

Clenching the ring in his fist, he felt its weight ground him. The song, the whispers, the book in a language he couldn’t read—they all pointed south.

The rest of the day, Bomani wandered the streets of Ait Benhaddou. The city pulsed with life. It was the Day of Faith, and everywhere, white fabric shone under the sun, transforming the crowd into a sea of purity and devotion. Women glided through the streets, their heads veiled as tradition demanded, while men wore white jalabas, their shoulders draped in the sacred cloth. Incense curled through the air, carrying the faint, bittersweet tang of frankincense and myrrh.

Bomani adjusted his jalaba for the fifth time, struggling to keep it draped over his shoulder. It felt foreign against his skin, as if the fabric itself resisted him. The weight of it was wrong—too ceremonial, too performative. He tugged at it awkwardly as he climbed the steep steps leading to Rhah's Temple.

On the steps, people sat in clusters, passing flagons of wine and laughing beneath the blazing sun.

"Join us!" a man shouted, raising a cup high. "Drink to Rhah's blessings!"

Bomani ignored the call, his thoughts spiraling inward. Blessings, he scoffed silently. What blessings has Rhah given me? Is he even my god? The question struck him like a blade.

I am a Niss of Khushaniss, he thought, a faint bitterness curling through him. Or half of me is, if Rhoko spoke the truth. But why would he lie? He was dying.

Ahead, the steps stretched endlessly, their edges worn smooth by centuries of devotion. On either side, beggars sat in ragged rows, their hands outstretched. The blind

and crippled, the sick and starving. Their sunken faces and trembling hands reminded Bomani of the fragility of human life.

He stopped briefly to drop coins into the hands of the blind. One girl, no older than seven, sat with her face turned toward the sky, her milky eyes unseeing. A lump formed in his throat as he looked at her.

Why wouldn't Rhah heal her? He wondered, anger flaring in his chest. If I had godly power, I would heal her. I would give her sight so she could run and play with the other children instead of sitting here, begging for scraps.

For years, Bomani had prayed to Rhah—prayed for strength, for courage, for the bravery to lead his men into battle. But standing here now, surrounded by suffering, the prayers felt hollow.

Perhaps Rhah is not real, he thought. How could he be, and take Rhoko away?

The jalaba slipped off his shoulder, dragging behind him. He didn't notice until a soft voice spoke from behind.

"Up until now, you still don't know how to wear the jalaba."

Bomani turned to find a veiled woman standing behind him, holding the fabric in her hands. Her eyes, dark and bright, held a spark of amusement.

"People will think you're not one of them, Commander Bomani," she said lightly.

The words struck him harder than they should have. I’m not one of them, he thought. I’m a half-god. But he couldn’t bring himself to say it. Instead, he smiled faintly. “It keeps falling. I don’t know how to keep it on my shoulder.”

“If you had a woman at home, perhaps you would know how,” she teased, stepping closer. Gently, she draped the jalaba back over his shoulder and placed his hand on it.

“You see how the men walk? Holding their chests like this?”

Bomani nodded, his gaze fixed on hers.

“Then do the same,” she said.

She walked away, descending the steps with a quiet grace. Bomani watched her until she disappeared around the corner of a nearby building.

When he turned back to the temple, Rhah’s massive head loomed above him, carved from dry mud. The statue’s eyes stared down at the city, cold and unblinking. For a moment, Bomani felt as though they were staring straight through him, into the depths of his soul.

He climbed another step, then stopped.

What god does not answer his people? He thought bitterly. What god lets the blind beg for sight and the crippled beg for legs? The temple seemed larger now, heavier, as if its shadow were bearing down on him.

“Not today,” Bomani murmured. He turned and began descending the steps, leaving Rhah’s silent, unyielding gaze behind.

The streets of Ait Benhaddou were alive with celebration. The smell of roasted meat and spiced wine filled the air, mingling with the sharp tang of incense. Crowds moved in every direction, laughter and music spilling from taverns and pleasure houses.

Bomani avoided the noise, heading instead to the fighting pits. Here, beneath the city’s surface, real warriors gathered. Men bled for sport, fighting to the death or until one could no longer stand.

Tonight, Bomani did not fight. He leaned against the wooden rails, watching as two men grappled in the dirt, their faces streaked with blood and sweat. His mind, however, was elsewhere.

The night was calm, but Bomani’s thoughts churned like a storm. Every step back into the city felt heavier than the last, the weight of his name—Niss—pressing down on him.

A knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts.

“Enter,” he said.

Tchamda stepped inside, followed by Sobek and two other generals. Sobek carried a rolled parchment in his weathered hands.

“You’re not sleeping,” Tchamda observed, leaning casually against the wall.

Bomani turned. “The men will march whether I sleep or not. What’s that?”

Sobek stepped forward, placing the scroll on the table. “A message. Delivered by a traveler before the gates closed. He said it was meant only for you.”

Bomani broke the unfamiliar seal—a serpent coiled around a crescent moon. Unrolling the parchment, he found a map. Its lines were sharp, the ink unfaded. A direct route to Khushaniss.

The generals leaned closer, their eyes scanning the page.

“This is what I’ve been waiting for,” Bomani said quietly. He rolled the map back up. “The road ahead is longer than I thought.”

Tchamda studied him, his expression unreadable. “You’ve made up your mind, then.”

“I have. Gather the men. Every able warrior. At dawn, we march south.”

Sobek hesitated. “South? Along the river? No one sails south. The maps are untested, the waters—”

“I don’t ask,” Bomani said sharply. “I command. If the answers are there, then that’s where I’ll go.”

The room fell silent. Sobek nodded reluctantly. “By dawn,” he said before leaving.

Bomani turned to the window. The desert stretched out before him, endless and unyielding. The ring on his finger glinted faintly in the moonlight, its carvings catching the light.

What lies beyond the river? He wondered. Ice? Shadows? Truth—or death?

For the first time in months, his mind felt clear. The answers were out there.

And south, he would go.

DAMU

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Damu’s jaw tightened as his eyes scanned the group again, his pulse hammering in his ears. Another detail stopped him cold. A Slaver, the hulking man with cracked skin and sun-scorched eyes, casually twirled a familiar weapon in his massive hand—a double-edged axe, its polished steel glinting in the sunlight.

Bahati’s axe.

Damu felt his stomach drop, the memory of Bahati’s laugh, his steady voice, flashing through his mind. That axe had never left his side.

A strangled cry tore from Towila’s throat, breaking the silence. “Damu! Look!” he choked, his trembling hand pointing toward the axe. His voice was thick with dread, raw with disbelief.

“I can see it,” Damu snapped, though his voice cracked under the weight of his emotions. He couldn’t afford to lose control—not here, not now.

Tails grumbled, his daggers already drawn, grinding his teeth as he bit down hard on his lip. “Say the word, Damu.”

Damu’s heart pounded in his chest, the image of Akina’s book flashing before his eyes, Bahati’s axe spinning casually in the Slaver’s hand. The fury that had been simmering inside him boiled over, and the world seemed to narrow to the sound of his own ragged breathing. He wasn’t thinking anymore-he was moving.

“The word is kill,” Damu hissed.

Before the others could respond, Damu lunged forward. The sentries barely had time to react. His blade flashed in the sunlight as it cleaved through the throat of the nearest Berber, blood spraying across the ground as the man dropped like a stone.

The second sentry shouted in alarm, his hand scrambling for the hilt of his sword, but Damu was already upon him. With a brutal thrust, he drove his blade into the man’s chest, the steel sliding between ribs with a sickening crunch. The sentry gurgled, his weapon clattering uselessly to the ground as he fell.

“Damu!” Towila shouted, startled by the sudden explosion of violence.

But there was no stopping now. The other Slavers and Berbers turned at the commotion, their eyes widening as they saw the lifeless bodies at the entrance. Chaos erupted.

“Take them!” Damu barked, his voice raw and unyielding, the leader in him roaring to life.

Tails was the first to react, leaping forward with both daggers flashing. His blades caught a wiry Slaver off guard, slashing across his chest and sending him stumbling backward. Tails grinned savagely, his movements quick and fluid as he pressed the attack.

Ali, the self-proclaimed Somali Prince, let out a battle cry as he charged forward, his curved sword carving an arc through the air. He clashed with the towering Slaver wielding the great axe, sparks flying as their weapons collided. The brute roared, swinging his massive weapon in a wide arc, but Ali ducked low, moving with the grace of a predator.

Towila hesitated for only a moment before gripping his spear and rushing into the fray. He jabbed at a lean woman adorned with colorful bangles, who twisted away at the last second. Her daggers flashed as she countered, slicing toward his neck, but Towila parried with a desperate thrust.

Monkey Face barreled into the fight with a roar, his axe swinging in wild, heavy arcs. He smashed into the hulking giant of a Slaver, who barely managed to raise his spear in time to block. The force of the blow sent both men staggering, their feet skidding in the dirt.

Damu didn’t stop moving. His blade was an extension of his fury, slicing and stabbing as he pushed deeper into the Fortress. Every swing was fueled by the Image of his sisters-scared, taken, or worse. A Berber lunged at him with a scimitar, but Damu sidestepped and drove his sword into the man’s side, wrenching it free with a twist.

His breath came in harsh, ragged gasps. He couldn’t stop. Wouldn’t stop.

The lean woman with the scarred cheek darted toward him, her curved daggers flashing dangerously. She was quick, faster than the others, and her strikes came in rapid succession. Damu blocked the first blow, parried the second, but the third nicked his arm, drawing a line of blood across his sleeve. He hissed in pain but didn’t Falter. With a burst of strength, he slammed the hilt of his sword into her Jaw, sending her sprawling to the ground.

“Damu, on your left!” Tails shouted.

Damu turned just in time to see the wiry slaver rushing him, twin swords raised. Damu ducked beneath the first swing and pivoted, driving his shoulder into the man’s chest to knock him off balance. The Slaver stumbled, and Damu seized the opening, plunging his sword into the man’s stomach.

A sudden cry drew his attention. Ali had been forced back by the towering great axe-wielder, who now advanced on him with a murderous grin. Without hesitation, Damu sprinted toward them. The great axe came down in a deadly arc, but Damu tackled the Slaver from the side, knocking him off balance. Before the brute could recover, Damu drove his blade into his neck, ending the fight with a spray of blood.

The battlefield fell into a tense silence, the sounds of the dying fading into the background.

Damu stood amidst the carnage, his chest heaving, his blade slick with blood. Around him, his companions gathered, their faces painted with a mixture of exhaustion and shock. The Slavers and Berbers lay scattered on the ground, their bodies broken and lifeless.

Towila looked at Damu, his voice trembling. “What now?”

Damu wiped the blood from his blade, his jaw tight, his eyes burning with a deadly resolve. He turned toward the heart of the fortress, where the answers-and his sisters-might be waiting.

“We move forward,” he said, his voice cold and steady. “No one gets in our way.”

In an instant, the clearing was flooded with reinforcements-Slavers and Berbers alike. Too many. Far too many. Damu’s blood ran cold as the realization sank in. Bahati was still nowhere to be seen, and now it was twelve against what seemed like an army.

Towila had managed to reclaim Bahati’s axe from the Slaver he had stabbed through the chest with his spear. The weapon’s weight felt familiar and right in his hands, but its return offered little comfort amidst the mounting chaos.

The initial shock of their assault had dissolved into a desperate struggle for survival. The air reeked of blood and iron, the once-vibrant cobblestones now slick with gore and littered with broken bodies injured men.

They were surrounded.

Damu rolled his neck, the discomfort of fatigue clawing at him like a second enemy. His muscles ached, his body drenched in sweat and streaked with blood—some his, most not. Yet his grip on the black Shontel Khabaa sword remained firm. The blade had tasted too much blood tonight to falter now.

Betho, quiet but ever watchful, had claimed a pair of daggers from a fallen Slaver. She flipped them casually in her hands, their edges glinting in the dim torchlight. Her expression was unreadable, her fingers moving with practiced ease.

Tails, in stark contrast, stood still, a faint smile tugging at his lips. He didn’t speak, didn’t glance at the others, but the wild glint in his eyes betrayed his thoughts. To him, it was a game—a deadly one, but a game all the same.

Chacha, the most pragmatic of them, was staring intently at Damu, awaiting orders. His knuckles blackened as he tightened his grip on his blade, his gaze flickering briefly toward the surrounding wall of Berbers.

The soldiers—clad in their dark green tunics emblazoned with the golden monkey—moved like a single organism, shields locking together to form an unyielding wall. The sight was unnervingly precise, their discipline a stark contrast to the chaotic battlefield.

Then, a booming voice cut through the tense silence, sharp and commanding.

“Do you know what you’ve done?!”

The words rang out from amidst the Berbers, echoing against the scorched stone walls of the fortress. The warriors closed ranks tighter, their shields shifting with a unified metallic hiss. Their banner, a dark green standard bearing the golden monkey, rippled faintly in the evening breeze, a silent witness to their overwhelming numbers.

Damu's jaw clenched as his gaze swept the line of shields, searching for the source of the voice. Whoever had spoken was hidden behind the wall of green and gold, their presence a looming threat.

"You've spilled the blood of the prince's guard!" the voice bellowed, dripping with authority and venom. "Do you know the price for such treason?"

Ali's voice cut through the tense silence; his arrow still trained on the advancing wall "who is talking?" He snapped, his eyes darting across the line of shield. "Can you see who is talking".

When no answer came his frustration boiled over. With a sharp exhale, he loosed the arrow towards the of the voice it streaked through the air like a viper, slamming into one of the Berbers. The soldier staggered back with the choked cry; the arrow lodged deep in his shoulder.

Behind Ali, Fish-neck laughed as he drove his sword into the throat of a Slaver who had rushed too close. Blood sprayed in an arc as the man crumpled at his feet. "I don't see." Fish-neck said with a wild grin "and I don't care!"

Betho’s fingers stilled for a moment on the daggers, her sharp eyes narrowing.

“Treason,” Chacha murmured under his breath, spitting the word as though it left a bitter taste. “If we die here, that’s what they’ll call it.”

Tails let out a low chuckle, his grin widening. “If we die here, they can call it whatever they like.”

“Quiet,” Damu growled, his voice low but firm. His heart pounded in his chest, but his expression betrayed none of the storm raging inside him. He couldn’t afford doubt now—not with Akina and Chiku’s lives hanging in the balance.

The voice roared again, rising above the din of the battlefield. “Surrender! Lay down your weapons, and perhaps the Crown Prince will show mercy to your miserable lives!”

Damu’s fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword. His gaze flicked to Betho, to Tails, to Chacha, and the others. He saw their resolve in their eyes, their willingness to stand and fight despite the odds. Despite the fear, the pain, and the crushing exhaustion, they stood together.

“We’re not laying anything down,” Damu muttered, his voice a quiet rumble meant only for his companions. “If they want us, they’ll have to come through us.”

Betho grinned darkly. “Good. I was starting to get bored.”

“They’re too many,” Chacha whispered, his voice shaking despite his brave front. “We can’t win this.”

But before Damu could respond, another voice broke through.

“Enough of this!” roared a Slaver with a bloody gash running across his face. His ragged voice was thick with fury and exhaustion, but his words were a rallying cry. The brief pause shattered as the clang of steel on steel erupted once more plunging the clearing back into chaos.

“Too many!” Kaka bellowed; his voice raw as he deflected a blow aimed at the Pygmy.

The Pygmy, a blur of surprising strength and speed, danced through the chaos, his axe-hammer arcing with brutal efficiency. The weapon struck bone and armor alike, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. But even he was slowing, the relentless tide of enemies threatening to overwhelm them.

The strangled cry tore from Towila’s throat, and Damu’s gaze snapped toward him, his blood running cold. Towila was locked in a desperate struggle with a hulking Slaver, but what caught Damu’s eye was not the fight—it was the head. Bahati’s head, mounted on the spike.

Days had passed since it had been placed there, and time had not been kind. The once proud features of Bahati’s face were now a grotesque mask of decay. His skin, once rich and dark, had turned a mottled gray-green, the sun baking it dry in some places while rain and humidity bloated it in others. The eyes, once bright and full of life, were now sunken and clouded, hollowed out by scavenging birds or insects. One eyelid hung partially open, as if Bahati were staring blankly into the distance,

while the other was gone entirely, leaving a gaping socket.

His lips had shriveled back, revealing teeth that seemed too large for his shrinking face, and his nose was little more than a dark, collapsed shadow. His hair, once thick and coiled, now clung to his scalp in brittle, matted clumps, streaked with dried blood and dirt. The stench was overwhelming—a putrid mix of rotting flesh and decay that made Damu's stomach churn. Flies buzzed relentlessly around the head, their incessant hum a grim soundtrack to the horror.

The spike itself was stained dark with dried blood, and the ground beneath was littered with feathers and the remains of insects. Bahati's head, once a symbol of his strength and dignity, now served as a brutal reminder of the Slavers' cruelty. Damu's chest tightened, a wave of grief and rage crashing over him. Bahati, his brother, his friend, reduced to this—a lifeless, decaying spectacle. The sight burned into Damu's mind, fueling the fire of his resolve. This would not be forgotten. This would not go unanswered.

"Damu! Over here!"

The voice cut through the chaos like a blade. Damu's heart jolted as he turned toward the sound.

A man was caged at the edge of the clearing, his face smeared with blood but unmistakably alive. His broad, muscular shoulders strained against the iron bars, and his tall, commanding figure seemed impossibly diminished in the cramped prison. He had skin the color of rich, sun-kissed earth, marred with bruises and dirt,

and his unwashed dreadlocks hung in thick, knotted ropes past his shoulders. Despite his battered state, his eyes burned with a fierce urgency, like embers stoked to a blaze.

“Get me out of here—I can fight!” the prisoner shouted again, his voice sharp and desperate.

Towila and Damu exchanged a concerned look. They were outnumbered, and a skilled fighter could tip the balance in their favor. But the man had called Damu by name—how?

“Perhaps he knows where the girls are,” Damu thought, unease prickling at the edges of his mind.

“I’ll get him!” Towila shouted, breaking away from the fray.

Hope, fragile and fleeting, flickered to life in Damu’s chest. It wasn’t over-not yet. With renewed fury, he carved a bloody path through the chaos, his sword rising and falling as enemy after enemy fell before him. Every swing was an act of defiance, every step a declaration: he would not stop, no matter how many stood in his way.

A cruel laugh drew his attention, and he turned to see a Berber warrior of the prince’s guard approaching. The man flung a severed arm toward Damu, a gruesome distraction that sent rage surging through him.

Damu roared, his famous sword, a Shontel Khabaa steel forged by the Alkushan black smiths, glinting black in the flickering torchlight.

The Berber smirked, his shield raised and his nimbleness betraying his brutish form. He danced away from Damu’s

first swing, countering with an elbow that drove into Damu’s ribs.

Grunting in pain, Damu shifted his stance and lunged, but the Berber slipped under the blade and lashed out with his own weapon.

A sharp sting tore across Damu’s arm as the blade bit into his flesh. Blood seeped into his sleeve, but he didn’t falter. Instead, he pressed the attack, his strikes wild and desperate.

Towila was still struggling to cut the chains of the cage, at the same time fighting the soldiers who came at him all the time.

“Towila!” Damu shouted, his voice strained. “Get that man free—now! We’ll need him!”

Towila didn’t hesitate, slamming a soldier against the cage in his rush. The prisoner’s hands shot through the bars, seizing the soldier’s neck with a crushing grip. The man’s choking cries faltered as his body slumped lifeless. Towila’s grin twisted, savage and sharp, as he turned back to the task at hand.

With one final swing of his blade, the binding chains snapped. The prisoner staggered out, his massive frame barely fitting through the cage door, clutching his raw, bruised wrists.

“Can you use this?” Towila asked, tossing him Bahati’s axe.

The prisoner caught it with ease, his lips twisting into a feral grin. His dreadlocks framed his bloodied face as he tested the axe’s weight, his muscles coiling like a

predator preparing to strike. His eyes, burning with rage, locked onto the slavers.

A dozen of them closed in, circling him like vultures. He bent his neck from side to side, the audible crack of his joints cutting through the din of the battlefield.

“Come on,” he growled, his voice low and venomous. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Hey, prisoner! Come with us!” the Towila shouted, slashing his way up the stairs.

But the prisoner didn’t move. Instead, he squared his shoulders, planting himself in front of the advancing horde. His expression hardened, resolve unshakable.

“Leave these to me!” he bellowed, his voice cutting through the chaos like thunder. “Follow Damu—go! The girl is up there—and the prince!”

For a moment, Damu hesitated, his heart lurching. Could they really leave him behind? The man had just been freed, and now he was choosing to face death alone.

“Go!” the prisoner shouted again, his voice fierce and commanding.

Clenching his fists, Damu turned and surged toward the stairs, leading the others deeper into the fortress. Behind him, the clash of steel and the prisoner’s furious battle cries echoed in his ears—a haunting reminder of the price they were all willing to pay.

Kaka stood frozen amidst the carnage, his spear slack in his trembling hands. Around him, the battlefield was a gruesome tableau—bodies of Slavers, Berbers, and their

own fallen comrades lay scattered across the cobblestone ground, lifeless eyes staring skyward. Blood pooled in cracks where moss had grown over the stones, darkening the earth with iron and death.

The abandoned fortress of Kirua loomed like a specter over the fight, its broken towers clawing at the storm-streaked sky. The stone walls were blackened with soot, remnants of some long-forgotten fire that had devoured the stronghold. Vines and creepers snaked up the walls, fighting for dominance over the crumbling structure. The cobblestones beneath Kaka's feet, once polished and pristine, were slick with blood, the smears of combat blending with old stains and ash.

"Kaka!" Monkey face's voice roared through the chaos, pulling him back. "Move, damn you!"

Kaka flinched, his eyes darting to Damu, who was carving a brutal path through the enemy ranks. Shame burned in his chest. He forced his legs to move, his spear snapping upward just in time to parry an incoming blow from a Slaver. The clang of steel snapped him fully back into the fight.

Meanwhile, Damu's fury was a living thing, driving him forward with relentless force. He ducked under the wild swing of a Berber's sword, stepping into his opponent's guard and slamming the pommel of his blade into the man's jaw. The guard staggered, and Damu's sword flashed in a vicious arc, slicing deep into his shoulder. The man crumpled with a strangled cry, but Damu didn't stop.

The Shontel Khabaa sword in his hands was a masterpiece of blackened steel, its edge honed so fine it seemed to cut the air itself. It was a gift from his father, Zahur of Azania, the day Damu had helped to win the battle of the mountains against the frogeaters.

“A sword is more than a weapon, Damu,” Zahur had said, holding it out to him. “It is the weight of your responsibility. It must be wielded with purpose.”

Damu had taken the sword with pride then, the heavy steel unfamiliar but thrilling in his grip. Now, years later, it felt like an extension of his body, its weight a constant reminder of the burdens he carried. But here, in the ruined fortress of Kirua, that burden burned hotter than ever. Akina, Chiku, he thought, their faces flashing in his mind with every swing. I’m coming.

The corridors of the fortress were narrow and treacherous, rubble piled high against scorched stone walls. Smoke still lingered in faint wisps along the cracks in the stone, as though the stronghold itself remembered its destruction. The air was thick and stifling, carrying the metallic tang of blood and the acrid scent of old fire.

Damu rounded a corner and found himself face-to-face with a trio of Berber guards. Their dark green tunics, emblazoned with the golden monkey, marked them as the Crown Prince’s men.

“You’re in the wrong place, lowborn!” one of them spat, raising his scimitar.

Damu didn’t hesitate. His sword struck like a viper, deflecting the first attack before plunging into the gut of

the speaker. The man’s eyes went wide, his weapon slipping from his fingers as he fell.

The second guard came at him with a shield raised, but Damu feinted left and slashed upward, carving a jagged line across the man’s thigh. He fell with a howl, clutching his leg. The third swung wildly, desperation fueling his strikes. Damu caught the blow on the edge of his sword, twisted, and drove the blade deep into the man’s side.

The bodies fell in his wake as he pressed onward, his boots slipping slightly on the blood-slick floor. The sounds of battle faded behind him as he approached a heavy oak door.

He kicked it open, the hinges shrieking in protest, and stepped into the chamber beyond.

The room was an unsettling blend of opulence and ruin. Rich tapestries hung tattered on the walls, their once-vivid colors dulled by smoke and decay. A long table, its surface marred by scorch marks, sat beneath a massive chandelier of rusted iron. And at the far end of the room, the Crown Prince of Luxor stood waiting.

Damu froze.

The Crown Prince, dressed in a dark green doublet embroidered with gold, exuded a regal arrogance that sent a surge of hatred through Damu’s chest. He held himself with the practiced poise of one who had spent his life in privilege, but the bloodstained sword in his hand and the scars that lined his arms revealed him for

what he truly was—a fighter, honed and sharpened by castle training.

“I wondered when you’d make it here,” the prince said, his voice calm and almost amused. He idly twirled his blade, the motion deceptively lazy. “You’ve made quite the mess of my men, you know.”

Damu’s grip on his sword tightened. “Where are my sisters?”

The prince’s lips curled into a mocking smirk, his voice low and venomous. “Ah, yes. She told me you would come. The brother, the brave brother, rushing to save his precious sisters.” He stepped forward, his blade glinting ominously in the torchlight. “Your younger one… what do you call her? Chiku? She was wild, that one. Kept screaming Akina’s name as they dragged her away.”

He paused, savoring the look of rage that twisted Damu’s face. Then his tone darkened, becoming colder. “But Akina… Akina is different. She’s mine now, I’m afraid. Fierce, yes, but she bent all the same. If you want her back…” The prince raised his blade, pointing it directly at Damu. “You’ll have to take her from me.”

The words were like a punch to Damu’s gut, but he forced himself to remain steady. “You’re a prince,” he growled. “You swore an oath to protect your people. And yet you deal with Slavers?”

The prince chuckled darkly, stepping forward. “A king must build alliances, no matter how distasteful. The Slavers serve a purpose, just as I do. But you wouldn’t understand that, would you?”

“Understand?” Damu hissed, his voice trembling with rage. “I understand enough.”

The prince’s smirk faded, replaced by a cold, calculating gaze. He raised his sword, the tip gleaming in the flickering light. “Then come. Let’s see if your understanding extends to the blade.”

Damu stepped forward, his own sword rising as the distance between them closed. The room seemed to shrink, the air thick with the weight of what was about to happen.

Two warriors. Two blades. And a fortress that would decide their fate.

Damu unsheathed his Khabaa sword, the legendary blade forged in the shadowy mountains of Alkushan. Its pale-black sheen absorbed the flickering torchlight, a dark star in his hands. The weapon was as infamous as the warriors who wielded it, but to the Prince of Oromo, it was simply a prize waiting to be claimed.

The prince stood tall; his scarred face twisted in a sneer. His muscular frame loomed, a scimitar gripped in his right hand and a dagger gleaming in his left. The scar above his left brow crinkled as he smirked.

“Ah, a Khabaa sword,” he said, his tone thick with mockery. “It seems fortune favors me tonight. I’ve always wanted one.”

Damu’s fingers tightened around the hilt of his blade, his voice steady and cold. “You talk too much.”

The prince’s sneer twisted into a scowl, and in an instant, he lunged. Their swords collided with a

deafening ring, sending sparks into the air. The battle began in a blur of steel and motion, each man striking with precision and power.

The prince’s dual weapons came at Damu with a deadly rhythm—slashing high, stabbing low, a symphony of lethal strikes. Damu barely kept pace, his Khabaa sword strong enough to parry the scimitar’s ferocious blows, but even its legendary steel couldn’t compensate for his fatigue.

Sweat dripped into his eyes as they circled each other, their footfalls echoing in the narrow chamber. The clash of their blades was relentless, a deadly song that filled the air. But the Prince was too fast, his movements honed and relentless.

A sudden strike broke through Damu’s guard, and the prince’s scimitar sliced through his armor. Pain exploded across Damu’s chest, warm blood seeping into his tunic. He stumbled back, gritting his teeth to hold back a cry of pain.

“You’re slow,” the prince taunted, circling him like a predator toying with its prey. “I expected more from the son of Zahur. Perhaps your father’s greatness has been… exaggerated.”

Damu’s jaw clenched as the insult pierced deeper than the blade had. But he held his ground, his voice sharper than steel. “You talk too much.”

The prince lunged again, and their swords clashed with a thunderous ring. The battle spilled from the room to the

stairs, and then into the dimly lit hallway, the narrow space amplifying the sounds of their brutal fight.

Damu’s strength waned. His breath came in short, ragged gasps, and the wound on his chest burned with every movement. One misstep cost him dearly—a brutal blow knocked the Khabaa sword from his grasp. It skidded across the floor, disappearing into the darkness of the compound outside.

The prince advanced, his scimitar raised high, the blade gleaming in the torchlight. For a moment, Damu’s vision blurred, and he thought this might be the end.

But something deeper kept him moving. As the Prince swung, Damu rolled to the side, the scimitar slicing the air where he’d been only a heartbeat before. His eyes darted frantically, searching for something—anything. A cracked wooden shield lay discarded nearby. He seized it and raised it just as the prince’s blade came down again.

The shield shuddered under the force of each strike, the relentless blows rattling through Damu’s arms. The wood splintered, and he knew it wouldn’t last much longer.

Then he saw it: an opening. The prince’s dagger hand dipped ever so slightly. Damu hurled the shield with all his strength, the edge slamming into the prince’s side and forcing him off balance. In the same breath, Damu grabbed a jagged rock from the ground and hurled it at the prince’s hand.

The rock struck true, slamming into the prince’s fingers and sending the dagger clattering to the ground. The prince cursed, his hand clutching the injury.

That distraction was all Damu needed. His gaze snapped to his fallen sword, gleaming faintly in the moonlight outside. He sprinted toward it, snatching the hilt with a grip born of desperation. Turning, he charged the prince with renewed determination.

This time, the fight was different. Each strike from Damu drove the prince back, the Khabaa sword singing with each swing. The tide had turned, and the prince knew it.

With a swift, decisive motion, Damu delivered the final blow. The obsidian steel sliced clean through the prince’s neck, his body collapsing to the ground in a lifeless heap. His eyes, wide and frozen, stared into the void.

Damu stood over him, his chest heaving, blood dripping from his armor. “You talk too much,” he said quietly, the weight of his words cutting deeper than any sword.

Cheers erupted around him as his men surged forward, their victory cries echoing through the compound now littered with the bodies of slavers and the prince’s warriors. But Damu did not join them. His gaze swept the battlefield, his chest tightening with unease. Something was wrong.

Then he saw her—Nneoma, emerging from the shadows, her face pale and her hands streaked with blood. “You need to come. It’s your sister,” she said, her voice trembling.

Damu’s heart sank. He followed her through the compound to a small room. The smell of blood hit him first, thick and metallic. Then he saw Akina, lying motionless on the floor. Torn cloth was tied tightly around her wrists in a futile attempt to stem the bleeding. Bruises marred her arms, her face. She looked so small, so fragile.

“I tried,” Nneoma said softly. “I tried to stop the bleeding, but… I don’t think she’ll make it.”

Damu knelt beside his sister, his hand trembling as he reached for hers. Her eyes fluttered open, and for a moment, he thought she might speak.

“Find her,” Akina whispered, her voice so faint he had to lean close to hear. “Find Chiku.”

Her eyes closed, and her chest fell still.

For a moment, everything else faded—the cheers outside, the smell of blood, even the burning pain in his chest. All he could feel was the void her absence left behind.

Damu bowed his head, his shoulders trembling. A memory surfaced: Akina’s laugh when she was a child, her hand in his as she raced to keep up with him. Now, that laughter was gone.

When he rose, his face was a mask of cold resolve. He gripped the hilt of the Khabaa sword tighter, its pale-black blade heavy with the weight of his promise.

“Find Chiku,” he murmured to himself, his voice low but unyielding.

The night stretched before him, dark and uncertain. The battle was over, but Damu knew his war was only just beginning.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHIKU

The crate was suffocating, its walls pressing in on Chiku like the jaws of a beast. Teakwood, rough and unyielding, confined her to a space barely large enough to turn around. It creaked as she shifted, her ribs protesting the movement with a dull, persistent ache. This was her world now—a wooden prison, her only companion since the prince gave her away as a gift.

“One hundred and twenty-nine,” she rasped, her voice raw and cracking from disuse. Counting her turns was all she had left, a desperate rebellion in the endless dark. Her fingers, raw from clawing at the splintered walls days ago, rested limply on her knees.

The midday sun seared through cracks in the crate, its heat mingling with the stink of sweat, urine, and old blood that clung to her like a second skin. Two suns ago, she’d abandoned screaming. The bald-headed slaver with the face like a pitted plum had laughed too hard at her cries, his amusement echoing in the stillness of the crate.

Now the crate jolted again as her captors moved through the forest of Kirua. The forest was alive—the trill of birds, the rustling of leaves, the creak of ancient trees swaying in the breeze. But these sounds of life mocked her. Outside was freedom; inside, she felt herself rotting.

When the slavers stopped and finally hauled her out of the crate, her limbs screamed in protest as they unfolded. Blinking against the sudden assault of sunlight, she squinted at her surroundings. Tall trees with trunks as wide as houses loomed overhead, their canopy splintering the sunlight into dappled golden pools. Around her, small footpaths snaked through the undergrowth, winding past the ruins of abandoned homes, their thatched roofs caved in, their walls devoured by moss and vines.

“Damu,” she whispered, the name escaping her lips like a prayer. The forest swallowed her voice whole. He should have found her by now. He was supposed to find her.

Tears burned in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Instead, she clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms until they left crescent-shaped marks. A choked sob rattled in her chest. “I want to go home,” she whispered, her words breaking like brittle glass.

But home was farther away with every step they took deeper into this endless labyrinth of green.

The adventurous spirit had gone out of her, and with it, her bravery. Chiku was no longer the bold girl who had once leapt into the unknown with wild abandon. Now she

was a trembling child, haunted by Bahati's beheading and Akina's sacrifice.

"Don't be scared. Everything is going to be alright," Akina had whispered when the crown prince dragged her toward the castle. But nothing had been alright.

"Leave her alone!" Chiku had screamed, kicking wildly at the prince's iron grip, her voice cracking with despair. Bahati had stepped forward then, his face a storm of fury.

"If you win, I will let them go. If you lose, you die. Your choice," the crown prince had said, his voice calm, almost bored.

Bahati had said nothing. He simply reached for his double-edged axe, the weapon's chipped blade gleaming dully in the sunlight. The prince unsheathed his sword and dagger, his movements fluid, confident.

The slavers and Berbers had crowded around them, jostling for space in the castle's crumbling courtyard. Elbows dug into ribs as they formed a rough circle, eager to watch the fight unfold- a duel to the death between two warriors.

"Kill him, Bahati!" Chiku had yelled, her tear-streaked face flushed with desperation.

"Come on!" Bahati roared back, his voice a guttural mix of rage and dread.

The crown prince smiled, the expression cold and cruel. To Bahati, this was a fight for survival. To the Prince, it was a game-a chance to amuse himself, to show off the skills honed within the gilded walls of the Oromo palace.

He was the crown prince of Oromo, heir to the ruling tribe of Alkebulan, trained by the finest swordsmen in the realm.

Bahati, by contrast, was a barefoot warrior from Damu's ragtag army. Chiku didn't know where he had come from; he never spoke of his past. But she rooted for him with all her heart. He was bigger than the prince, taller, and his weapon was massive. Once, she'd tried to lift his axe and couldn't even budge it.

In her mind, she pictured Bahati victorious-the prince begging for mercy, defeated at Bahati's feet. But deep down, she knew this was just a desperate fantasy. The prince was fast and lethal, his every move calculated.

The courtyard was silent now, save for the distant calls of ravens and the murmured cheers of the Berbers and slavers. The air felt heavy, thick with tension.

Bahati stood in the center of the circle, his massive frame a stark contrast to the lean, poised figure of the crown Prince. His grip on the axe was tight, his knuckles red. Across from him, the prince stood with his sword in one hand, his dagger in the other, his posture relaxed, his eyes blazing with deadly focus.

Chiku's heart pounded in her chest as she watched. Akina squeezed her hand tightly, her gaze never leaving Bahati.

"He's going to win," Akina whispered, her voice trembling but firm, as if willing it to be true.

Chiku nodded, though fear gnawed at her insides. She wanted to believe Akina. She wanted to believe Bahati

could win. But the crown prince was ruthless. She had no doubt he would kill Bahati without hesitation, without mercy.

And so, as the two warriors squared off, the hopes of three lives-Chiku's, Akina's, and Bahati's-hung in the balance, swaying precariously with each passing second.

The fight began, Bahati's axe carving wide arcs through the air, his strength palpable in every swing. The crown prince danced around him, light on his feet, his dagger flashing like fire in the sunlight. Each dodge, each weave, seemed effortless, as though the prince were toying with him.

Bahati roared, bringing his axe down in a ferocious strike. The prince countered with his sword, the clang of metal on metal ringing out across the courtyard. The impact reverberated through the ground, shaking loose stones and dust.

Back and forth they moved, their breathing heavy, their movements swift and punishing. Chiku's heart thundered in her chest as she watched, unable to tear her gaze from Bahati.

The prince kept circling, his feet moving in a predator's rhythm. He jabbed with his sword, darting in and out like a snake striking, forcing Bahati to pivot again and again. Bahati's narrow-eyed helm, meant to protect, was now his greatest disadvantage, obscuring his vision. The prince exploited it mercilessly.

Time stretched endlessly. The yard became their battlefield, their movements tracing spirals across the

uneven stones. Bahati swung at the prince, but his axe cleaved only air. The prince’s dagger struck quick and sharp-an arm, a leg, twice at his shoulder.

Bahati’s wooden shield bore the brunt of several attacks, its surface splintering under the assault.

Bahati grunted in frustration, his chest heaving with exertion. Chiku thought she heard him mutter a curse, low and ragged, but otherwise he fought in grim silence, his focus unyielding.

Yet, despite his strength, Bahati was faltering. The prince’s speed and precision were wearing him down, his relentless attacks chipping away at the larger man’s defenses. Fatigue etched deep lines into Bahati’s face, his movements growing slower with every passing moment.

Chiku bit her lip, her nails digging into her palms as the fight dragged on. Beside her, Akina was trembling, her lips moving in silent prayer.

Then Bahati made his final, desperate move. Summoning the last reserves of his strength, he swung his axe in a powerful arc, aiming directly for the Prince’s head. For a split second, Chiku thought it might connect.

But the prince was too quick. He dodged, fluid as water, and struck back. His dagger flashed, plunging deep into Bahati’s thigh.

A guttural cry escaped Bahati’s lips as he stumbled, yanking the dagger out with shaking hands. Blood poured from the wound, dark and unrelenting. He

staggered forward, off balance, and the prince seized the moment.

The sword came down in a clean, brutal arc. It struck Bahati’s stomach, cutting deep. He dropped to his knees, his axe slipping from his hands. His breaths came in shallow gasps as the prince stepped forward, his shadow falling over the fallen warrior.

“You lost. You failed them,” the prince muttered, his voice devoid of sympathy.

Bahati turned his head weakly, his eyes seeking Chiku and Akina. Tears streamed down their faces as they watched, powerless to intervene. Chiku could barely breathe.

With a single stroke, the prince brought his sword down, and Bahati’s body crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

Chiku’s scream tore through the courtyard, raw and filled with anguish. It echoed off the walls, fading into the vast emptiness of the castle.

Akina clutched her hand, her grip iron-tight, her face pale with horror.

They stood frozen, watching the prince take Bahati’s axe and sling it over his Shoulder as if it were a trophy.

Chiku couldn’t bear it anymore. These were the things she wanted most to forget the wailing of Akina, trapped in the castle with the prince; the brutal, senseless death of Bahati. Her mind spiraled into chaos, her body trembling with the force of her despair.

“I want to go home,” she whispered, the words breaking like glass against the air. But home was a place she couldn’t reach-not anymore

A harsh chuckle cut through the humid air. Before her stood a young soldier- Manu, they called him. No older than her brothers, Hami and Damu, yet with a cruelty that aged him far beyond his years. A beardless face twisted into a smirk, a single eye burning with malice. The other eye, long gone, was a scarred void that told tales of battles fought far from the lands of Alkebulan.

Manu was a foreigner, a sellsword who had crossed seas for coin, yet his presence carried the weight of countless campaigns. To Chiku’s frightened eyes, he seemed to be death itself.

“He lost an eye in those battles,” she thought numbly, her mind trying to make sense of the monster before her.

In his hand, a dagger gleamed wickedly. At his hip, a short sword hung ready. He tilted his head, his cruel smile deepening. “Home is a place you’ll never see again, young princess. You’ve a new one waiting for you across the bloody sea.”

His words scraped against Chiku’s raw nerves like a blade. She flinched, not from the weapon in his hand but from the casual malice in his voice. How could someone so young carry such a cold, knowing glint in their eye? Hatred, hot and primal, curled in her belly.

“You have a new one waiting for you across the bloody sea,” Manu’s words echoed in her mind.

The prince had boasted about his friend on the island of Zanziba-Abd Al-Rahman al-Masri-who would pay gold for the “wild little one.”

“What would he want with me?” she wondered bitterly, though deep down, she feared the answer.

“He would make a good wife of you,” the prince had said once, his tone dripping with condescension.

“I will not be anyone’s wife!” she shouted, her voice cracking with fury. “I want to go home!”

The soldier’s laughter echoed through the castle walls; a cruel chorus that made her cheeks burn with humiliation.

“My brother is coming, and he will kill you all!” she spat at them, her defiance flickering like a dying flame.

Another roar of laughter rose from the men. The prince sneered, his eyes glinting. “I’ll be here waiting for your brother, but you? You’ll be long gone by then. Al-Masri is waiting.”

Chiku had hoped-foolishly-that Damu would hear her if she screamed his name loud enough. For hours, she did just that, her cries piercing the night, her voice raw with desperation. The soldier banged the wooden box to silence her, and others threatened to cut out her tongue. But their threats meant nothing to her. By the time darkness fell, her voice had died. Her screams faded into whispers, heard only by the slaver who sat beside the crate.

“Please, Damu, come and save me,” she prayed, over and over. She prayed not to any god, but to her brother, as though his name alone held the power to save her.

By the next day, she was too tired, too hungry, and too broken to scream anymore. When they pulled her from the box, her thoughts were consumed only by food—anything to fill the gnawing emptiness in her belly.

The men lounged beneath the shade of towering trees, their laughter carrying through the humid air. Some gnawed-on Mondia whitei roots, others chewed roasted cassava and yams. One of them casually tossed her a piece of yam, the gesture more command than kindness.

Chiku caught it, devouring it without hesitation, even as its rough edges scraped her throat raw. She swallowed too quickly, desperate to quiet the ache in her belly. The yam was tasteless, dry, but she licked her fingers clean, savoring every crumb.

Later, when they shoved her back into the crate, a few scraps of food were thrown in after her. They landed with soft thuds against the wooden floor. She clawed at them in the suffocating darkness, cramming them into her mouth as though they might disappear.

The wood groaned beneath her as the cart jolted forward. The stale, rancid air choked her lungs, and her body ached from the tight confines. Her mind, dulled by exhaustion and hunger, spiralled into nothingness. She no longer remembered when she had stopped screaming or praying for Damu.

Her eyes closed, and sleep crept over her, pulling her down into its depths.

And then her world changed.

She stood outside the walls of Ramshorn Castle, her father’s seat of power. The fortress loomed against the sky, its stones warm beneath the sun, its banners fluttering in the breeze. Around her stretched the endless forests of Azania, alive with the hum of cicadas and the rustle of leaves. Cool dirt curled between her toes, and the air smelled of rain-soaked leaves and flowers she couldn’t name.

“Chiku, what are you doing out here?”

The voice was unmistakable, gentle and teasing. She turned, and there was Damu, leaning casually against the trunk of an ancient tree. His arms were crossed, his posture relaxed, but his dark eyes studied her with quiet intensity.

Her heart swelled at the sight of him. “I’m waiting for him,” she said, her voice steady as her gaze turned to the shadows between the trees.

“For who?” Damu asked, though his expression suggested he already knew the answer.

“The white lion,” Chiku declared, a grin lighting up her face. “I will ride him, Damu, and become the warrior queen tonight.”

Damu chuckled, the sound rich and warm, wrapping around her like a protective embrace. “You know the white lions are just stories. They can’t be in these woods.”

Her grin faltered for a moment, but then she straightened her shoulders, lifting her chin. “In my dreams, they are,” she said defiantly, her voice ringing with determination.

Damu smiled wider, his expression softening. He stepped closer and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder, his touch firm yet gentle. “Then dream well, little queen,” he said, his voice low and filled with a quiet conviction. “And remember, you are stronger than you think.”

His words lingered as the dream began to shift. The warmth of the forest faded, and the sunlight dimmed into darkness. The rustle of leaves gave way to the steady patter of rain against wood. The cool, rain-scented breeze dissolved into the bitter staleness of the crate.

Chiku’s eyes snapped open.

She was still in the crate. The air inside was damp and cold, heavy with the metallic tang of moisture. Each breath clawed at her throat as the rancid, humid smell of the wooden planks filled her nostrils. The rain outside drummed steadily against the crate’s exterior, the sound muted but unrelenting. A cold trickle of water had seeped through a crack, tracing icy paths down her arm.

Her body ached from the cramped space, her skin raw and sticky against the splintered walls. She blinked rapidly, disoriented, her mind clinging to the memory of the dream.

The white lion.

It wasn’t just a story. Not to her. It was a promise, a flicker of hope in the suffocating darkness. Damu’s

words echoed in her mind: You are stronger than you think.

The cart jolted suddenly, and she was thrown forward, her head striking the wooden wall. She gasped in pain, her heart racing. Then, just as abruptly, the cart came to a stop. The silence that followed was thick and oppressive, broken only by the steady drumbeat of the rain. It pressed against her like a second layer of the crate, making it harder to breathe.

A sliver of grey light pierced through the seams, its dull glow barely illuminating the shadows. Her heart pounded as the rhythmic creak of the cart was replaced by heavy footsteps splashing through the mud outside.

With a bone-jarring thud, the lid was wrenched open, and cold rain poured onto her face.

The rain fell in a steady drizzle, its cold droplets stinging Chiku's eyes and forcing her to blink repeatedly. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, her fingers numb from the chill. Manu the One-Eyed loomed beside her, his single eye scanning the dimly lit entrance of the tavern. "If you promise to keep your mouth shut, you'll stay warm tonight," he grunted, his voice low and gravelly. "Maybe I'll even give you a cup of goat's milk for that little stomach of yours."

Chiku bit back the words that rose in her throat. 'I could use a cup of goat's milk, and black beans,' and pumpkins, and berries, she thought, her stomach growling at the mere idea. But she said nothing, knowing better than to provoke him. Instead, she allowed herself

to be pushed forward, her feet dragging through the mud as they approached the tavern.

The inn was a ramshackle structure, its wooden beams warped and darkened by years of rain and smoke. Light spilled from its grimy windows, casting long shadows on the muddy ground. As Chiku stepped inside, the warmth of the room hit her like a wall, thick with the smells of ale, sweat, and wood smoke. The air was heavy, almost suffocating, and the noise was deafening—laughter, shouting, and the clatter of cups and plates filled the space.

The tavern was crowded, packed with soldiers, drunkards, and whores. Chiku's eyes darted around the room, searching for a familiar face, but all she saw were strangers. Old men hunched over their drinks, their faces ruddy and their eyes glazed. Women in faded, revealing dresses perched on stools or leaned against the walls, their laughter sharp and hollow. Soldiers in worn armor filled the tables, their voices loud and boisterous as they drank and gambled.

Manu shoved her toward a corner table, forcing her to sit beside him. The other soldiers found a spot nearby, where a lone whore sat slumped over a wooden table, her head resting on her arms. When one of the soldiers nudged her awake, she blinked groggily, then quickly straightened, pretending she hadn't been sleeping. With a practiced smile, she slid onto the soldier's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck as if they were old friends.

Chiku watched silently; her hands clasped tightly in her lap. A flagon of wine was brought to Manu, and a horn cup of goat's milk was placed in front of her. She grabbed it eagerly, the warmth of the cup seeping into her cold fingers. She drank quickly, the rich, creamy liquid soothing her empty stomach. Some of the milk spilled down the sides of her mouth, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand, her eyes darting to Manu. To her surprise, he was watching her, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. She looked away quickly, her cheeks burning.

From across the room, a voice rose above the din. "He's dead. The Barefooted killed him."

The words cut through the noise like a knife. Manu's head snapped toward the speaker; his single eye narrowing. Chiku's heart skipped a beat. *The prince? she thought, her grip tightening on the cup.

"When was this?" one of the soldiers demanded, his voice sharp and impatient.

The drunkards hesitated; their faces wary. The soldier leaned forward, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. "Speak up, or have you bitten your tongue?"

"It's true," another drunkard called out from the bar, his voice slurred but defiant. "He was killed. The whole realm knows."

"When?" the soldier pressed, his tone growing harsher.

"Five days ago," the drunkard replied, his words hanging heavy in the air.

Chiku’s breath caught in her throat. He did it. He found Akina. He saved her. He’ll save me too. The thought filled her with a fragile hope, and despite herself, she smiled. She took another sip of the milk, the warmth spreading through her chest. For the first time in what felt like forever, she allowed herself to believe that there might be a way out of this nightmare.

The drinking stopped, and the argument erupted among the Berbers like a spark igniting dry tinder. “We should return to Kirua,” one of them insisted, his voice laced with desperation. “Find the bastard who killed the prince and bring him to justice!”

But his pleas were met with stony silence. The other soldiers, their faces grim, reminded him of his oath and his failure. Their words hung heavy in the air: “You will face the edge of the sword or the spike, no matter how you try to atone.”

A tremor of fear ran through Chiku. The news they carried was far worse than she could have imagined. The “bastard prince” of Ramshorn—the words escaped her lips in a defiant whisper—was accused of murdering the crown prince. But a sliver of hope bloomed in her chest. Damu wouldn’t abandon me. He’s coming for me, she thought, her voice trembling slightly despite her bravado. Yet, the memory of her sister Akina cast a long shadow over her heart.

The Berbers erupted into a heated debate. One advocated for a swift execution of Chiku, his voice cold and final. Another argued for selling her into slavery, his eyes gleaming with the promise of coin. But a third, his

face etched with worry, spoke a chilling truth: “War is coming. I want to be with my family when it does. Whatever you plan, count me out.”

He rose from the wooden table, grabbed a flagon of wine, and turned to leave. The other soldiers tensed, their hands drifting to their weapons. “You have your orders, soldier,” one of them barked, his voice sharp.

The dissenting Berber unsheathed his sword, the sound of metal slicing through the tense air. “Do you want to try and stop me?” he challenged, pointing his blade at the others. “Kill the girl and run, or let her go. Either way, she’ll bring doom upon you all.”

With those words hanging in the air, he vanished into the rain, leaving the remaining guards in a tense standoff. Chiku watched, a flicker of hope battling with the tightening knot of fear in her stomach. The Berbers were fractured, their loyalty wavering. This unexpected development could be her chance, but at what terrible cost?

The Berbers’ hushed murmurs were lost on Chiku. Resigned to her fate, she retreated into the familiar rhythm of her crate, counting turns to find solace in her tiny prison.

As they ventured deeper into the mist-shrouded Jozani forest, the band dwindled. Two Berbers remained her jailers, while another scouted ahead, leaving only Manu at the rear. The forest was alive with whispers—the rustle of leaves, the distant calls of unseen creatures, and the faint creak of ancient trees swaying in the wind. The mist clung to the ground like a ghostly veil,

obscuring the path ahead and wrapping the world in an eerie silence.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on Chiku. Her body ached from the jostling of the crate, and her mind was a whirlwind of fear, hope, and despair. Around the 60th turn of counting, her eyelids grew heavy, and the rhythmic creak of the crate lulled her into a fitful sleep.

In her dream, she was no longer a captive. She was grown, her frame tall and strong, her eyes sharp with determination. She stood in a sunlit savanna, the golden grass stretching endlessly in every direction. The air was warm, carrying the scent of earth and wildflowers. At her side stood a lion, its fur gleaming like molten gold in the sunlight. It was massive, its muscles rippling beneath its skin, but its eyes were calm and knowing, as if it recognized her as kin.

Without hesitation, Chiku climbed onto the lion’s back, her hands gripping its mane. The creature let out a low, rumbling growl, more comforting than threatening, and then it surged forward. The wind whipped through her hair as they raced across the savanna, the world blurring around them. She felt powerful, free, as if the weight of her captivity had been lifted.

In the distance, she saw a figure—a woman with her back turned, standing at the edge of a cliff overlooking a vast, shimmering lake. Chiku’s heart leapt. Akina. She urged the lion forward, but no matter how fast they ran, the figure remained just out of reach. The dream began to shift, the colors fading, the lion’s growl growing distant.

“Akina!” Chiku called out, her voice echoing across the savanna. But her sister did not turn. The dream dissolved into darkness, leaving only the faint echo of the lion’s roar.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BOMANI

The river narrowed, its banks closing in like a trap.

Bomani stood at the prow, staring at the wooden barricade stretched across the water. Thick logs bound with iron, sharpened stakes jutting upward—a crude but effective blockade. Beyond it, warriors lined the shore, their bronze-tipped spears catching the morning light. At their center stood a man draped in red, his arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

Tchamda’s voice was low. “They were waiting for us.”

Bomani exhaled slowly. He had expected resistance, but not this soon. Not with these lesser clans.

On the shore, the chieftain raised a hand, and a horn sounded—deep and hollow, like a warning.

A challenge.

Sobek stepped beside him, fingers tightening around the hilt of his blade. “Shall we show them who we are?”

“These are not our enemies, I need to know who this chieftain is before I make my decision.” He thought.

Bomani’s lips pressed into a thin line. No one in the south knew his name. Not yet. But they would.

He raised his hand, signaling his men to hold. Not yet. Not until he decided how this would end.

From Songhai the river waters were friendly, the winds pushing his ships smoothly through the divided lands. On his left, it was the red lands, a hush desert that accepts no life except for a few scattered tribes on the river shores of Zambezi, and on the right, the famous Alkeblan, a kingdom he had heard of only in stories.

The voyage had taken them weeks, with an army of fifty thousand men and women, the first largest army Boman has ever led.

“You can do this,” Tchamda would tell him.

A boat came back, blood all over it, arrows standing in his men. These were his third group of men he had sent, to get the chief to negotiations.

“Tchamda,” Bomani called with scorn, walking across the ship as Tchamda limped behind him. “We need to cross. The chief left me no choice but to strike, it seems your people only understands only force.”

“You can’t do this, this is Alkeblan, you invade one clan, the whole tribe will come for you, the whole kingdom will come for you. Their army is five times to ours.” Tchamda pleaded. “Let me speak to them.”

“Time of negotiating is over, I can’t spare any mor men, especially not you Tchamda. Tell my generals to convene for a meeting.”

Bomani walked into his cabin and closed the door.

The cabin was dimly lit, the flickering oil lamps casting restless shadows against the wooden walls. The air smelled of salt and parchment, mingling with the faint metallic scent of steel. Bomani sat at his desk, a heavy table cluttered with books, scrolls, and maps of Alkebulan. He ran his fingers Over the worn leather covers, tracing the names of ancient rulers and long-forgotten battles.

At his side, resting against the desk, was his sword—a Khabaa steel blade, black as obsidian. It was a rare weapon, forged in the old ways, its dark surface drinking in the light rather than reflecting it. A blade like this was not merely crafted; it was willed into existence, meant for men who carried the weight of kingdoms on their shoulders. He unsheathed it slowly, listening to the whisper of steel against leather. The edge was honed to perfection, sharp enough to slice through bone, yet it carried something heavier than death—history.

He exhaled, rubbing his temple as thoughts pressed against his mind. Three times his men had had been slain, their lives taken by faceless warriors who guarded the blockade with ruthless precision. Three times he had

been forced to retreat, his pride bleeding as much as his forces. Now, the question loomed over him like a storm: to strike or to yield?

Tchamda’s warning echoed in his ears. If you strike, the whole kingdom of Alkebulan may come for you.

Bomani leaned back, staring at the ceiling, where the wood groaned softly under the weight of the sea. He had spent years studying the history of this land, poring over every war, every betrayal, every kingdom that had risen and fallen. Alkebulan was not merely a kingdom; it was an empire stitched together by blood and steel, where alliances were as brittle as glass and vengeance was carried through generations.

The books before him were filled with lessons—ones he had studied long before stepping onto this path. The War of the Five Clans, the Siege of Mbalu, the rise and fall of the Obun Kings—each story told him the same truth: power did not belong to the strongest sword, but to the sharpest mind.

His fingers tightened around the hilt of his blade. If war was coming, he would not meet it as a reckless warrior. He would strike not with rage, but with purpose. He had seen too many men die for the sake of pride alone.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Enter,” Bomani said.

Tchamda stepped in, his face unreadable. “The generals are waiting.”

Bomani gave one last glance at the books before him, then stood, his Khabaa steel sword gleaming in the lamplight as he slid it back into its sheath.

“Then let’s decide the fate of this war.”

Bomani opened his eyes when the wooden door pushed open. Dhidie walked in, a vessel of clean water in her hands. “A dream troubles you milord, I hard you scream in the night”

Bomani nodded his head while he sat on the bed, he turned to the Khabaa that leaned against the stone wall.

“I am not a lord” he said.

“if you say so milord, your food is ready when you are ready milord” she replied.

“Thank you dhidie”

She left the towels and disappeared behind the door.

Malindiih was beautiful everywhere Bomani lingered. The traders had already joined the rest of the Malindiih traders in the marketplace, his sword was hanging on his belt as he walked past the animals. Young ladies admired his young beard and body and they loved the way he nodded at them. The young ones came running after him admiring the pommel of his sword

The slavers were shouting, bargaining and cursing each other over slaves that were starved, wounded or killed, most of the slaves were weak. Bomani stopped and looked for a while as naked men and girls were being sold off.

“if you keep looking at them, you will become a trader yourself.” A voice spoke from behind. It was Mhogo the trader.

“I want to show you something, come with me.” The trader said.

They strode along the slavers stalls and then through the whore establishments that were packed with young girls of Khanagha, the blues of Anakha and the whore

boys of Ghodo – “the Ghodo’s are hermaphrodites, they say the boys can give good luck” the trader said.

“Have you tried them?” Bomani asked.

“I have not had a chance myself but the people who talk, have also said that it’s not true, the boys don’t give luck – they take it.” The trader said.

The two had crossed the old bridge approaching the hunter’s markets.

“My friend,” the trader narrated briskly “We were young traders, together selling spices and salt, the days were bad there was not much coin to be made in spice and salt business, and one day my friend he decided to try the luck givers, when he came back, he was not the same person. He came with luck, but no good luck —he lost all he had made in his youth days, and in no time he was buried in date until he lost his head as forfeit”

They had reached the old books seller Khunga, he was blind and old, almost a decade old.

“Khunga has every book that talks about the legends of the 16 kingdoms and their ethnicities ” the trader said

Khunga was standing behind the old books, he seemed to be looking at them with a smiling face.

“Is he staring at us?”

“He is blind, but people say he can hear your blood run through your veins and your heart pumping from a league away, he knows we are here.”

“welcome please” khunga said.

“we are here for old books about the 16 Kingdoms” the trader said.

“Most books have been burnt or stolen and others have been bought off by the Tahas of Khanduus…there is one book that just came in, the forbidden tales of Khushanis, history of double bloods, I don’t know what to do with it, it’s not like there is any double blood left”

“ I will take that,” Mhika said curiously.

“it’s forbidden, if they catch you, you will die for it”

“I will take my chances sounds fan reading it”

The next days of the journey after a fortnight in the Malindiih markets, Mhika devoted to reading the book. So devoted that he could miss his meals, his conversation with the trader became shorter, he only had time for the big volume of *The forbidden tales of Khushanis* he was getting to know everything about the Khabaa kingdom, the Nis god and his loved one Virha, he read about the undying Kings, prince’s and the princesses. He read about the Khushanis twins of mixed blood….. Mhika was not a good reader according to the master trader who kept asking him which page he was on, sometimes he could get lost in pages, and the next day he was reading way ahead of the book or reread what he had already read.

He promised himself to read most of the chapters while on the ship from the Shona markets, Malindiih towns to the free cities of the Damned which he never did on the ship. The captain, who called himself *king at Sea of the dead,* kept Mhika busy all day, and in the nights the

pigmy folks kept him drinking and merry making until he passed out.

A fortnight went by and his majesty's ship docked on the little man's bay. Mostly the people were fisher men and fishing villages , and here his majesty was to bring on board other people who were traveling to the free cities.

The little man's bay almost gathered slavers, running twins and their mothers, dwarflings and orphans, and also thieves and sellswords who were looking for masters to serve.

"three days is all we got to our next voyage," his majesty said. "don't get too drunk or we will leave you on this shity place"

"I intend to stay on the ship until we get going" the trade master said. "I suggest you do the same"

The traders had not gotten off the ship, they would go for the day and in the night, they would return to retire. Others would get drunk and end up fighting in the taverns which Bomani would come in the middle to stop them.

He was walking back at the ship when he heard the noise. He recognized the noise of a young man among traders Babangida his name was.

Babangida the sparrow or Babangida the talkative. Mikha never liked his talkative nature, he would not stop talking, even when everyone was quiet. At one time he had asked Mikha if he would teach him how to fight but Mikha turned him down.

He was being chassed by the Muru tribesmen, and Mikha watched, he had lost in the gambling game and failed to pay and now he was going to be sold to the slavers which he had agreed on his last wage.

“Help me” Babangida shouted.

“I don’t know if I want too” Mikha said.

The men pulled out cutthroats, “ he is coming with us” they spoke the language Mikha did not understand and Babangida only understood only a few of their dialect.

“What are they saying?” Mikha asked. “you know what, I don’t care”

He walked. The men grabbed Babangida as he struggled.

Later Mikha came in and offered them the money he had which they took and demanded for the sword he had on his belt.

“You should have taken the money” Babangida said.

They pulled their cutthroats and he pulled a sword and the fighting began.

The coast of the Damned was every trader’s last point of trade in the realm before everyone went back to their homes.

“Remember, there are no rules here, whore any way you want, gamble, steal --- do whatever you want, but whatever you do in the city you don’t bring to my ship” his majesty announced before they went off the ship.

They were walking up the hill and Mhika watched a man get killed over a piece of bread, everyone was watching

and no one did a thing. When he looked back on the ship, people were still getting off, he had not thought that the ship had brought so many people like that...the twins who were running from death or being sold to the slavers, widows who were looking for new husbands and slavers who were looking for more buyers.

On the ship everyone was safe until they got off, there was no stealing, fighting, buying and selling of any commodities apart from foods and drinks, the twins would pay more to be protected from the slavers until they entered into the city and when Mhika looked back the King's men were escorting a big number of twins from the ship.

Mhika had wrapped his sword and book to avoid the eyes the pigmys the master trader had warned him about their ways of stealing.

"These are the free cities" the master trader told Mhika. The rest of the way, Mhika lingered along the streets with great buildings old and new.

The free cities had vast streets and they were built on the hills and lake shores mostly it was populated with unwanted folks from the Alkeblan kingdoms. Mhika seemed to love the place, everyone seemed to be happy, filthy children were playing on the street, at the same time young men were fighting in the alleys.

"this place was a desert 1400 years ago before the coming of the gods" The trader began to explain. "it was ruined by tribal wars during the time of kuku beings that was along time ago, now look at it – a city full of life,

everywhere you see is business, people have made a life here."

Their conversation was interrupted by a fabric seller after they had crossed the cloudy gate. The fabric seller kept up with them until Mhika offered a coin for a swahili kanzu. Beyond the gate, the fellowship had reached another slave market inside the city walls,

"most young maidens are sold here." The trader said. One of the slavers jumped to them, throwing his heavy hand on Mhika's shoulder trying to convince him to buy himself a maiden or two or three – whatever number he liked....

"I am not interested in buying any maidens or person" Mhika said and throw away the heavy arm.

The pleasure Houses and taverns, establishments and the fighting pits were next after the slavers markets, the rest of the fellowship had made camp where the other traders were camped, Mhika and the master trader continued up to the Durah's establishment.

He was the top buyer of the maidens and the richest in the free cities.

"He had more establishments in the city of Benin." The master trader said.

"This is as far as we go Mhika Bomani, a ship is paid for you to kush mountains, best of luck my friend," everyone on the streets was about their business, people walking up and down others running after each other.

"we will return to our journey back in the morning" the trader said.

The next morning, Mhika bid farewell to the trader and his people. When they returned to the majesty's ship, Babangida did not join them.

"where are we headed master" Babangida said

"I didn't ask you to follow me"

"You saved my life, I want to pay you back"

"Give me the coin and return back to the ship"

"That's the thing, I don't have the coin, I lost all of it at the table."

"So how do you intend to pay me back if you don't have the coin"

"I will serve you, carry your luggage, wash your clothes, feed your horse"

"I don't have a horse and I can wash my own clothes"

"am sure there is something I can do for you to pay my date"

"Carry my bags then"

The ship to kush was to depart in the next three days, the captain had told him a few nights ago.

Later in the day, Mhika was alone again Babangida had remained at their room or went to gamble or anywhere. And mhika had started to miss the company of the trader master and his fellowship, the majesty of the dead sea and the coloured girls of khilivi town. He walked about the streets, he went to the fishing bay where he met the Malindiih fishermen, after there he went to the fighting

pits where he watched the Dhilanghos fighting chained zandhas to the death.

This is where he found Babangida he had thought to be at the inn.

“What are you doing here?” Mhika asked.

“Same thing you are doing”

In the pit the Dhilangho was killed and Babangida lost he wedge

“ I thought, you had no coin”

“my last one”

“I think you should quit gambling”

“Too late for the advice don’t you think. Perhaps you can get in there and we make some coin”

“Not a chance”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZAHUR

Aching bones creaked in protest with every slow step Zahur took across the polished obsidian floor. At eighty years old, the journey to Adansi, the grand castle of the Akan Chieftain Kuntunkrunku Kwame Cudjoe, had taken a toll on the former Lord Chancellor of the 17 kingdoms. Yet, the weight of responsibility etched deeper lines on his weathered face than the physical strain. The fate of Alkeblan hung precariously in the balance, and Zahur, once a titan who steered the realm from the shadows,

felt the burden of his age and past choices more keenly than ever.

Adansi, perched atop a windswept mesa, loomed on the horizon like a hulking bronze beast. Its thick, fortified walls, built from a dark, volcanic rock called nkwanta, gleamed menacingly under the relentless desert sun. Jagged, spear-like towers pierced the azure sky, each one adorned with the bleached skulls of enemies, a gruesome testament to the Akan's martial prowess. Atop the highest tower, a single, colossal brass bell hung suspended, its surface etched with arcane symbols that shimmered with an otherworldly light. Legend whispered that the bell held the power to summon a sandstorm so fierce it could bury entire cities – a potent reminder of Cudjoe's fearsome reputation.

Reaching the castle gates, Zahur found them heavily guarded by warriors clad in crimson war paint and adorned with gleaming ivory tusks. Their stern gazes and the heavy thud of their war drums served as a stark warning to any who dared approach the Akan stronghold with less than honorable intentions. Here, amidst the oppressive heat and the ever-present threat of violence, Zahur, the once revered architect of Alkeblan, felt like a frail reed caught in a merciless windstorm. His ornate robes, a symbol of his past authority, seemed misplaced against the backdrop of raw power and tribal ferocity that permeated Adansi.

Cudjoe, a frail figure of ninety-five years with flowing white hair and beard, had been Zahur's companion in arms during their youth. Age had taken its toll on Cudjoe, his once-powerful physique now weakened. The

Adansi people, descendants of the Alkebulan, shared a rare bloodline that granted them slow aging, a trait they shared with some northern tribes. Zahur himself possessed this blood, though at eighty he bore none of Cudjoe's frailty.

"Grave news, my friend," Cudjoe said, his voice raspy. "Peace has held for many years, but I fear it crumbles. News of the prince's death has spread like wildfire. The realm knows what has transpired, and by whose hand."

Zahur squeezed his eyes shut, yearning for a return to a bygone era of peace. "For a decade," Cudjoe continued, "the seventeen kingdoms have known tranquility. No war, no conflict. But that era is at an end, my friend. I grieve for your daughter as well."

Zahur sank deeper into despair upon learning of Akina's death. Fever ravaged his frail body, confining him to bed for days. The Master healer of Akan warned that without movement, Zahur would weaken further. Thankfully, herbal remedies coaxed him back to eating and drinking.

Zahur, basking in the flower garden as per the Master healer's counsel, was gripped by grief. Akina, his sweet, inquisitive daughter, was gone. Her twentieth name day loomed in two moons, a day he'd promised to send her to the Pharaoh's Lighthouse, a beacon of knowledge she longed to explore. "I want to be an oracle," her voice echoed in his mind, "to study all the realm's knowledge."

The crown prince, however, had shattered that dream, perhaps a just punishment for Damu's actions against Akina's killers. Zahur was consumed by a double loss: his beloved daughter and the potential treason his son, the

prince, had committed against the 17 kingdoms. The prince belonged to the Serer of Elmina, the mightiest and ruling tribe of Alkeblan.

“Njaajan Njie is a good man,” Zahur insisted to his wife, Belkis, and his friend, Cudjoe. “He’ll listen to reason. War won’t be necessary.”

Belkis scoffed. “Your king, you mean. Your bastard twin son who murdered the only heir? What do you think he craves most? An apology? The entire realm knows the truth, Zahur. What fate awaits you when you face him, if you’re even granted an audience?”

Cudjoe’s niece, Damram, chimed in, “They say the king isn’t the charming figure from the bards’ songs anymore. Power has given him a ravenous hunger.”

Zahur remained resolute. “I raised the king. I placed him on that throne. We share blood. He wouldn’t dare harm me.”

Belkis burned with anger. She blamed Zahur for Akina’s death, and perhaps Chiku’s as well. The young woman had vanished without a trace. “The gods are furious,” Belkis spat one morning. “This is your fault! If you’d removed the twins from the palace, none of this would have unfolded!”

The weight of Belkis’ words settled heavily on Zahur. Had he been too trusting? Too blind to the potential darkness within his bloodline?

Zahur shouldered the blame, a heavy weight upon his weary shoulders. War loomed, a bitter truth his friend Cudjoe had confirmed. “I must speak to the king,” he

vowed silently. “If there’s a shred of the man he once was, 40 years ago, he might listen.”

Zahur, a former Lord Chancellor for three generations of Alkeblan kings, had a long and complicated history with the Njie dynasty. He vividly recalled Njie the First, a formidable ruler who’d fostered peace through shrewd diplomacy and unwavering strength. Njie the Third, the current king’s father, had been a stark contrast – a courteous and scholarly man who preferred libraries to battlefields.

It was Njie the Third’s unexpected demise that had thrust the young Njie the Fourth, then a prince, onto the world stage. Zahur, already serving as Lord Chancellor, had become a pillar for the inexperienced prince. He’d groomed Njie the Fourth, shaping him into a capable leader and securing his rightful claim to the throne. As king, Njie the Fourth initially displayed a promising blend of his father’s intellect and his grandfather’s resolve.

Zahur served diligently as Lord Chancellor for eight years. However, his role often required extensive travel across the vast realm. He negotiated trade agreements, quelled regional disputes, and ensured the smooth flow of tribute to the crown. During these absences, he relied on reports from the royal council. Their pronouncements were invariably positive: “Your Majesty thrives, Chancellor. A just and healthy king.”

Zahur, ever trusting, had basked in the reflected glory of a seemingly flourishing kingdom. Now, the truth gnawed at him. Had the council, eager to curry favor, painted a

false picture? Had he, blinded by loyalty and a touch of fatherly pride in his protégé, missed the warning signs?

Self-doubt gnawed at Zahur. Had Njie the Fourth, burdened by the weight of the crown, succumbed to the whispers of court flatterers? Or had some darkness always lurked within the prince, a shadow Zahur, in his hopeful optimism, had refused to see?

The weight of these questions threatened to cripple him. He straightened his spine, a flicker of defiance replacing the despair. He wouldn't succumb to self-pity. He would face the consequences of his actions, his misplaced trust. He would journey to Elmina, seek an audience with the king, and plead for peace. It was a long shot, a desperate gamble, but it was the only hope he had left.

"There's still good in him," Zahur insisted, clinging to a sliver of hope.

Cudjoe shook his head. "There are whispers, Zahur. They say the king's become a recluse, a prisoner within his own chambers."

"Then I shall be the one to break through those walls," Zahur vowed.

Belkis bristled. "You should take the Moran with you, a proper escort."

"An army marching on the king's city is a declaration of war, Belkis. War is what I aim to prevent."

Cudjoe offered a solution. "My men will accompany you, Zahur. We'll travel under the Akan peace banners."

Zahur recalled his arrival in Cairo with just ten men, all under the protection of the Akyem symbol. The city, ensconced within seemingly impregnable moats, now loomed as a daunting reminder of the potential conflict he sought to avoid.

The inky cloak of night shrouded Zahur's arrival. Unbeknownst to them, the king's "spiders," a network of informants, had been scuttling after them for three days, their eyes glinting in the shadows. Finally, the party reached the imposing concubine's gates of the south, a notorious passage for smugglers and less-than-savory characters.

A jolt of unease coursed through Zahur. This wasn't the grand entrance he'd envisioned. "A far cry from the king's court, Chieftain Zahur," drawled a voice dripping with disdain. Shehu, a tall, imposing figure with eyes as cold as obsidian, stepped forward, his hand resting on the hilt of a curved sword. "Expected you through the proper gate, wouldn't have pegged you for a man who consorts with thieves and whores."

Zahur's guard, a man named Ghato, bristled, his hand flying to his own sword. "One step closer, and you'll find yourself in pieces, boy! This is the Chieftain of the North, former Lord Chancellor himself!"

Shehu scoffed, a humorless glint in his eyes. "And I," he declared, his voice booming, "am the Queen's brother, commander of the king's guard, current commander, that is." He gestured towards Zahur's guard with a cruel smile. "And your esteemed Chieftain here seems to be the former Chancellor, attempting a rather clandestine

entry into the palace. Before you threaten me, old man," he continued, his voice low and menacing, "perhaps you should ask your lord what becomes of lawbreakers here in the belly of the city."

Zahur felt a lump form in his throat. Shame burned in his gut. He'd prided himself on his honor, yet here he was, a shadow of his former self, sneaking through the back door. "I have no kingdom," he rasped, his voice barely a whisper. "I serve the same king as you."

"We travel under the Akyem peace banner of the Akan," Cudjoe's man boomed, stepping forward. "Chieftain Zahur is under their protection. You know the law, Commander. If you harm him, war is inevitable."

Shehu's eyes narrowed. The air crackled with tension. Suddenly, he swang his curved sword and two of Zahur's men crumpled to the ground, headless, their blood spraying around Zahur's face. The Akyem peace banner, once a symbol of hope, now lay drenched in blood on the cobblestones.

A sound of swords unsheathing was heard in the air, both Zahur's guards and Shehu's pointed their swords and spears to each other. Shehu was smiling, blood covering his face. "let's go old man" Shehu murmured.

Zahur's heart hammered in his chest. "I come in peace!" he roared, his voice thick with desperation. "Spare my men, and I will come willingly!"

Shehu's smile widened, devoid of warmth. "A wise choice, old man."

Ghato, tears welling in his eyes, looked at Zahur. “Chief?” he croaked, his voice raw with fear.

“It’s alright, Ghato,” Zahur said, his voice surprisingly steady. “I must speak to the king. Go with the rest. I will find you in the morning.”

“And I will make sure you do,” Shehu added, his smile sending shivers down Zahur’s spine.

Zahur swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He had stepped into the lion’s den, and the king awaited.

The air grew thick with the stench of blood and fear as Zahur stumbled through the “Gods Keep,” a twisted mockery of a holy place. His men’s screams, once a cacophony of defiance, had died into an unsettling silence. He knew, with a chilling certainty, what awaited him beyond the next bend – a grisly display of their mortality.

Shehu’s words echoed in his mind: “Find them in the morning.” But the message was clear. Their heads, like the macabre trophies lining the walls, would serve as a gruesome warning to any who dared oppose the king.

Finally, they emerged into a vast, cavernous hall. Flickering candlelight cast long, grotesque shadows, dancing on the damp stone walls. The air hung heavy with the oppressive silence that followed violence. At the far end, a colossal throne loomed, a monument to power built from the bones and skins of conquered enemies. Two figures, clad in gleaming golden armor, stood sentinel on either side, their faces obscured by the darkness of their helmets.

Zahur’s heart hammered a frantic rhythm against his ribs. He strained his eyes through the gloom, searching for the king he knew. But instead, a figure draped in shimmering silks sat upon the throne. A woman.

His carefully constructed world fractured. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t what he’d expected. A cold dread snaked its way up his spine. Who was this woman, and what power did she wield in this twisted court?

A voice, like aged honey dripping over stone, slithered into Zahur’s ears. “Zahur, my old friend.”

The familiarity sent a jolt through him, even before he saw the face. “My Queen,” he rasped, his voice rough with apprehension.

He shuffled forward, and as the meager light revealed her features, a wave of dread crashed over him. This wasn’t the woman he remembered, a youthful consort to the king. This woman, her eyes glittering like chips of obsidian, was a predator coiled to strike.

“That throne,” he choked out, gesturing towards the macabre seat of power, “is not yours to occupy.”

A humorless smile played on her lips. “The king is indisposed, Zahur. And in his absence, I rule.”

“May I ask why?” The question tumbled out, laced with a tremor he couldn’t control.

The queen’s smile vanished, replaced by a steely glint. “No, you may not.”

Zahur’s breath caught in his throat. The silence stretched, thick and heavy with unspoken threats. Finally, he dared to voice his darkest fear. “Is he dead?”

“Not yet,” she purred, her voice sending shivers down his spine. “But his fate rests precariously in the hands of our healers.”

Despair gnawed at Zahur. He understood. It was too late. Darkness had infiltrated the heart of the kingdom, and he was powerless to stop it. As if sensing his despair, the queen descended from the throne, her movements measured, predatory. Shadows danced on the walls, mimicking her every step.

She was adorned in the war colors of the Kush – a deep purple dress that shimmered like a bruise, adorned with twin serpents coiling around her torso, their emerald eyes glinting with an unnatural light.

“The Kushite hunger for that throne has festered for centuries,” he said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Two hundred years of yearning, thwarted by your forefathers. What makes you think you, a mere outsider, could claim it?”

Zahur met her gaze, a flicker of defiance igniting within him. “The Sereres saw a man worthy of trust, a leader,” she countered, her voice surprisingly steady. “Perhaps you possess a similar talent for discerning hearts, Queen.”

A flicker of surprise crossed her face, quickly masked by a cruel smile. “Indeed,” she said, her voice dripping with venom. “I see through you, Zahur. The architect of this

kingdom, the puppet master who danced the king to his tune. And your little secret? The bastard son who now threatens the throne. You must have thought yourself quite clever."

Zahur's heart hammered against his ribs. Betrayal tasted like ash in his mouth. "What have you done to the king?" he demanded, his voice rising in anger.

"Your son's actions," she hissed, her voice laced with icy contempt, "have imperiled the king. He teeters on the brink of oblivion. This throne, Zahur, was rightfully yours, as it has been for generations past. But your precious twin…" she sneered, "oh, you didn't think I'd expose your deceit, did you? Your forbidden secret. You've forgotten the ancient edicts, Zahur, the very pronouncements laid down by the gods themselves during the War with the Night Dancer! Six hundred years ago, when the world trembled, the gods decreed: No twin shall dwell amongst our people. Banishment or death, those were the laws. You, who once enforced these very edicts with unwavering resolve, now stand before me a hypocrite. What has become of you, Zahur? The tides of fate have turned, and you are no longer the esteemed Chancellor, but a traitor to the throne you coveted."

"My time in that chair is long over," Zahur insisted, his voice surprisingly steady despite the tremor in his hands. "I need to see the king. You, Shehu, swore an oath to protect the king, and in his absence, the realm and its chieftains. Now, I command you to fulfill your oath! Take me to my king!"

Shehu scoffed. “My loyalty lies with the Queen now, not some outdated oath.”

“You’ll never be near him again,” the Queen hissed, her voice laced with venom. “Your twin son took that away from you.”

Zahur’s jaw clenched. “Then why this charade? Why drag me here?”

“Because you have been a good man, Zahur,” the Queen said, her tone shifting. “You’ve ruled the kingdom more than any king. The people trust you. They will listen to you, and the council will too, if you propose me as Queen of the 16 kingdoms. In return, you can go back to your desert and live your remaining days with your wife. Your son will be allowed to join the Askharis or the free cities. There will be no war. I know that’s what you want, Chieftain. That’s why you’re here – to avoid war.”

Zahur narrowed his eyes. “Your family is cunning and ruthless,” he said, his voice low. “But I never thought you foolish. I will die before trading my honor for anything.”

A gaunt figure, shrouded in shadow, emerged from the periphery of the throne room. Lord Oyat, his face etched with the map of a hard life, approached Zahur with measured steps. “I know the burden you bear, Chieftain Zahur,” he said, his voice a low rumble that vibrated with a quiet anger. “But this path leads only to ruin.”

Zahur squinted at Oyat, his own vision blurring with a tide of unwelcome memories. “What was your name

again?” he rasped, the question laced with a desperate hope to deflect the truth.

“Oyat, Chief Zahur,” Oyat replied, his voice steady.

“Ah yes,” Zahur choked out, the past rising like a specter. “The city that perished.”

“The Oyat people,” Oyat continued, his voice devoid of emotion but his eyes burning with unspoken accusation, “were my ancestors.”

Zahur felt the air grow thick around him, the weight of his past pressing down with suffocating force. “So tell me, Lord Oyat,” he challenged, his voice laced with a bitter defiance, “what would you have done when those savages descended upon your people? Raping, pillaging, leaving a trail of blood and ash in their wake? I was there, Oyat. I saw the men they slaughtered, the women they violated, the children they crushed under their boots. Thirty years have passed, yet the memory of that day remains branded on my soul.”

“And what of the innocent lives your son extinguished in his blind pursuit of vengeance?150 soldiers were with the prince that day” Oyat countered, his voice rising in controlled fury. “Was the crown prince, a mere boy himself, not also a victim in this bloody game of thrones? Justice, Chieftain, demands a clear head and a steady hand, not the impulsive rage of a Moran warrior.”

“He was serving the king’s justice!” Zahur roared back, his face contorted with a mix of grief and fury. “The law is clear – a Moran warrior may carry out the king’s sentence, no matter the target.”

“Except,” Oyat pressed, his voice laced with steely resolve, “when the law becomes a weapon wielded by the ambitious. A crown prince, a potential future king, murdered without trial? You know the precarious state of Alkeblan, Chieftain. This act throws the entire realm into chaos!”

Zahur looked at the Queen, his defiance crumbling in the face of her unwavering gaze. He shook his head slowly, a defeated sigh escaping his lips. “You will never be Queen,” he rasped, the words heavy with despair.

A flicker of something akin to amusement crossed the Queen’s face. “Perhaps not,” she conceded, her voice smooth as silk, “but patience is a virtue, Chieftain. Sleep on it. Let reason guide your decision. We shall speak again soon.” With a gesture of her hand, she commanded, “Take him away.”

Guards materialized from the shadows, their movements silent and efficient. Zahur, his spirit broken, allowed himself to be led from the oppressive throne room. The weight of his past, the uncertainty of the future, and the shattering revelation about Oyat pressed down upon him, leaving him a hollow shell of the man he once was. As the heavy oak doors clanged shut behind him, the only sound that echoed in the vast hall was the ragged rasp of his own breath, a stark reminder of his dwindling options and the perilous state of the kingdom.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ADIA

Adia stirred in her sleep, the scratchy cloak offering little comfort against the damp chill of the Kongolese forest. A dream, vivid and unexpected, unfolded behind her closed eyelids. She wasn't a fugitive, hunted and weary, but back within the familiar embrace of Murzuk castle. Laughter echoed through the grand halls, the joyous sounds of childhood chasing away the shadows that clung to her waking world.

Hami and Damu, no longer adversaries locked in a bitter rivalry, wrestled playfully on a plush carpet. Their shared peals of laughter filled the air, a melody as sweet as the desert wind chimes her mother loved. Akina, her braid adorned with fragrant desert roses, sat nearby, her nimble fingers weaving a tapestry that shimmered with stories. Even Chiku, usually lost in her own world of whispered secrets, joined in, her voice, once a hesitant murmur, now soared in a clear, captivating song. In this dreamscape, their bond was a shield, protecting them from the harsh realities that awaited them upon waking.

A fleeting pang of longing tightened Adia's chest. The warmth of family, the security of home – these were luxuries she could only grasp at in her sleep. Yet, amidst the bittersweet yearning, a spark of defiance flickered to life. This dream, a memory of a life stolen, fueled a newfound resolve. She would find her way back to her family, not to the idyllic dream, but to a reality where she would fight for them, protect them. With a newfound determination, Adia clung to the fading image of her united family, a beacon of hope that would guide her through the darkness.

The sweetness of the dream evaporated as quickly as the morning mist. Dawn, a cruel spear of light, pierced through the dense canopy, shattering the illusion. Adia awoke with a jolt, the harsh reality washing over her in waves. Loneliness gnawed at her, a bitter companion to the constant exhaustion. Her limbs ached from endless walking, nights spent on unforgiving forest floors, and a diet of monotonous mushrooms and roasted rabbit. Tears welled up, threatening to spill. How she longed for the company of her friends, for the simple joy of shared laughter.

Across the clearing, Ayana's men and Welete Wabi's crew of ladies bustled with activity. A sooty pot bubbled with a concoction that smelled vaguely of fermented roots, which Wabi, her brow furrowed in concentration, stirred with a long wooden spoon. As Adia stepped out from the makeshift shelter, Wabi straightened, her gaze falling upon Adia.

"Adia," Wabi greeted, her voice a low rumble. "Did you sleep well?"

Adia offered a wry smile. "Alive, at least. Where's my aunt?"

"Down by the river," Wabi replied. "We have many leagues ahead before we reach Adansi. You should eat some cassava porridge before we resume our journey."

"Thank you," Adia mumbled, accepting the chipped cup offered by one of the women. She cradled it carefully, blowing across the steaming liquid to cool it. Despite the gnawing emptiness in her stomach, Adia found it hard to conjure up an appetite. The image of her dream

family, a stark contrast to her current situation, lingered, bittersweet and heavy. Yet, even amidst the despair, a flicker of determination remained. She had to keep moving, to endure, for the sake of her family and for herself.

They navigated north, hugging the dense undergrowth and steering clear of any sign of civilization. Caravans of traders, their guards clad in gleaming mail, rumbled past on dusty trails in the distance. Smoke plumes rose from villages nestled against the western horizon, but no one dared approach their peculiar band. They weren't strong enough to pose a threat, yet too numerous to be easily subdued.

The Black Mountains, once loomed like a menacing barrier, were now a memory. The past six days had been mercifully uneventful, free from the constant fear of pursuit. Adia, however, couldn't shake off the resentment that gnawed at her. Hanuku, the enigmatic advisor, had stolen her life, whisking her away from everything familiar. No goodbyes to Kofi, her loyal confidante, or Abena, with whom she'd shared countless secrets.

Naïve dreams of a life in the capital – a grand wedding to a prince, a warrior champion, or perhaps the son of a powerful chief – had been brutally shattered. Ayana's frantic words echoed in her mind, "We're in danger. The Chieftain is dead, and his killers will hunt us down next."

Adia's memories of the Chieftain were fond – a kind old man, revered by the people. "But why?" she'd pleaded. "He was loved by everyone!"

Ayana’s reply, though cryptic, held a chilling truth. “Even the most beloved have enemies, child. Remember, our bloodline is a threat to some. Never forget that.”

The weight of those words pressed heavily on Adia. The idyllic life she’d envisioned had vanished, replaced by a harsh reality where her lineage was a curse.

They had made good time, skirting around towns and villages like wary shadows. The constant fear of pursuit had begun to ease, replaced by a cautious optimism. The Black Mountains had been crossed, the journey so far uneventful. Today, they hoped to reach the Pate border.

“We should be at the Pate border by nightfall,” Wabi announced, her voice carrying through the still air. As Taiwo ladled out another helping of the ever-present cassava porridge, Adia couldn’t help but ask, “Have you ever been to Akyem city, Wabi?”

Wabi paused, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her features. “A few times,” she replied finally. Before Adia could delve deeper, Ayana arrived, her face etched with worry.

Later, after a pit stop in the undergrowth, Adia rejoined the group, a nervous knot tightening in her stomach. “We should move on,” she announced, her voice reflecting the unease gnawing at her.

Ayana, ever vigilant, took the lead position, Hanuku a silent shadow by her side. Wabi and Adia followed, the rest of the party trailing behind. They walked with a renewed sense of urgency, fueled by the unspoken fear that lingered in the air.

Just as the sun began its descent, casting long shadows through the trees, a cacophony of sounds shattered the peaceful rhythm of their walk. Shouts, the terrified screams of horses, and the unmistakable clang of steel clashed in a horrifying symphony. But amidst the chaos, another sound sent chills down Adia's spine – a guttural, bloodthirsty cheer.

They were nearing the crest of a gentle slope, and in the distance, a line of brightly colored pavilions shimmered like a mirage. As they drew closer, the press of bodies grew thicker, the sounds louder, more distinct. Reaching the peak, Adia gasped.

Below them, nestled under the formidable stone walls of a small castle named Mbanza, a scene of utter chaos unfolded. A vast field had been cleared, transformed into a battlefield with makeshift fences and barriers. But this wasn't a war; it was a macabre performance.

Men, clad in mismatched armor, hacked at each other with a ferocity that bordered on madness. Horses, caught in the fray, shrieked in terror, their bodies twisting in a desperate bid for escape. Yet, the most disturbing element was the blood-thirsty frenzy in the onlookers' eyes, their cheers echoing across the field like a hungry beast's roar.

Wabi's steely gaze swept over the scene, her hand instinctively going to the bow slung across her back. "We can blend in with the crowd," she rasped, her voice barely audible above the din. "Stick close and stay quiet."

Adia’s heart pounded against her ribs, a trapped bird desperate to escape. This wasn’t the peaceful border crossing they’d anticipated. It was a gateway to something far more terrifying. With a silent nod, they plunged into the throng, the cheers and screams creating a wall of sound that threatened to drown out reason itself. The question now was, could they navigate this unexpected obstacle without attracting attention? Their journey north had taken a sharp turn, and the path ahead seemed shrouded in a dark and bloody mist.

Hundreds, maybe even thousands, thronged around the spectacle below, their faces contorted in a macabre mix of excitement and bloodlust. The ground was a churned mess of mud and debris – mangled armor, splintered lances, all testaments to a brutal battle that had likely raged for days. Now, however, it appeared to be reaching its climax.

Fewer than twenty soldiers remained mounted, hacking and slashing at each other in a desperate dance of death. The crowd roared their approval, their cheers blending with the clash of steel and the terrified whinnies of fallen horses.

Adia watched, her stomach churning, as two armored knights collided in a thunderous crash of metal. Man and beast tumbled to the ground, a tangled mess of flailing limbs and thrashing hooves.

“A tournament,” one of the Thwa girls piped up, oblivious to the brutality unfolding before them.

Wabi let out a sardonic snort. “Splendid,” she muttered as a gold-cloaked warrior, wielding a massive axe,

delivered a devastating blow. The shield of his opponent shattered, sending the man reeling backwards in his saddle.

They had unknowingly crossed the Pate border, swallowed whole by the chaos without anyone raising an eyebrow. For the next day and a half, they continued their journey, traversing bustling villages and towns. Finally, by nightfall, they reached the sprawling city of Memphis.

Adia's heart pounded with a mixture of trepidation and awe as they entered Memphis, the capital of the Adansi people. Renowned throughout the realm as master builders, the Adansi had left their mark on countless wonders – from the towering pyramids of Giza to the intricate castle of Elmina on the distant Serere coast. Legends even whispered that their handiwork might be found in the colossal northern wall that stretched across the continent.

Memphis itself was a breathtaking spectacle. Unlike the sprawling, organic layout of most cities, Memphis was a testament to meticulous planning. Imposing walls, adorned with intricate sculptures depicting mythical creatures, past chieftains, and legendary warriors, snaked around the city. Every building bore the sigil of Akyem, the royal house of Adansi, a symbol that seemed to shimmer with an otherworldly power.

Wabi's gaze was fixed on the most prominent structure – a colossal pyramid that dominated the city's skyline. Its peak, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, bore an even larger sigil of Akyem, visible for leagues around.

“By the ancestors,” Wabi breathed, “it must have taken an army to lift that symbol to such a height.”

Adia, accustomed to the grand scale of Adansi architecture, smirked. “Two thousand men, to be precise.”

Memphis bustled with activity. Merchants hawked their wares in bustling marketplaces, while nobles, adorned in extravagant finery, rode past on richly decorated palanquins carried by sweating slaves. The air vibrated with a cacophony of sounds – the rhythmic hammering of metalworkers, the melodic chants of street performers, and the excited chatter of the crowd.

“They call this city Memphis,” Adia explained, her voice barely audible above the din. “It’s ruled by King Cudjoe, the current head of the Akyem dynasty.”

Wabi raised an eyebrow. “King Cudjoe? They say he’s… 110 years old?”

Adia nodded. “Indeed. We, the descendants of the First Men, age slower than most. My own father is eighty-five and still going strong.”

Wabi’s eyes widened in surprise. “And you too?” she asked, her voice laced with a hint of reverence.

For the past six days, Adia had found a fragile sense of security within the ranks of the Oromo women. Wabi, in particular, had become a patient listener for Adia’s stories. Adia, eager to share the vast knowledge instilled in her since childhood, recounted the history of the Oromo people.

“The Oromo people scattered throughout the Kongolese kingdoms,” Adia explained, her voice filled with a quiet pride, “trace their roots back to the Hillu’s Belly, a region south of Abyssinia. It’s said to be the largest tribe within those fertile plains.”

Wabi, captivated by the tales, leaned in closer. “And what of the Hillu’s Belly itself? Tell me, are there grand castles there, like the ones the Adansi are so famous for?”

Adia’s eyes sparkled. “Indeed! Legends speak of magnificent castles, perched high upon the ocean shores, where the chieftains of the Oromo reside. Whispers claim the youngest chieftainess possesses hair that glows with an otherworldly light in the night. A sight I, myself, have always longed to witness.”

Wabi chuckled, a warm sound that echoed in the bustling marketplace. “Perhaps one day your wish will be granted, Adia.”

As they entered the heart of Memphis, the bustling city unfolded before them. Unlike the quiet anonymity of the wilderness, here they were the center of attention. Shopkeepers peeked from behind colorful displays, their curiosity piqued by the sight of the Oromo women. Wabi, adorned with intricate braids that cascaded down her back, drew the most curious stares.

Adia, sensing Wabi’s discomfort, nudged her arm. “They’re looking at you,” she said softly.

Wabi, accustomed to the solitude of the forest, bristled slightly under the scrutiny. Unlike the ornately attired

citizens of Memphis, the Oromo wore practical garments of cured sheepskin and deerhide. Yet, it was Wabi's crown of braids, a symbol of her heritage, that seemed to hold the most fascination. The city of Memphis, a marvel of Adansi architecture, was a stark contrast to the lives of the Oromo. Adia couldn't help but wonder how their arrival would be perceived by the people of this grand metropolis.

Wabi, a creature of the wilderness, found herself overwhelmed by the sheer throng of humanity clogging the streets of Memphis. Unlike the quiet solitude of the forest, the city pulsed with a chaotic energy. People swarmed in every direction, their purposes as varied as the colors of their clothing. Some haggled with vendors in bustling marketplaces, their voices rising in a cacophony of barters. Others rushed by with a focused determination, their destinations a mystery etched on their faces.

"Is it always like this?" Wabi gasped, her voice barely audible above the din.

Adia, accustomed to the vibrant rhythm of city life, offered a reassuring smile. "Usually. It's the lifeblood of a major trading hub."

Wabi, used to the sleepy pace of small Kongolese villages, couldn't help but feel out of place. The people here moved with a swagger, their clothing adorned with intricate embroidery and vibrant dyes – a stark contrast to the practical garb of the Oromo.

They crossed the first imposing gate leading into the heart of the city. Above them, bathed in the afternoon sun, loomed the colossal white pyramid.

“The White Pyramid,” Adia murmured, her voice laced with a hint of awe.

Unlike the pyramids of Giza famed for their reddish hues, this one stood out in its pristine white facade. This monumental structure, according to legend, was built around the very foundation of Memphis itself, serving as a tomb for the long line of Akyem kings and chieftains. The massive Akyem sigil, a symbol of power and lineage, gleamed proudly at its peak, a potent reminder of the Akan dynasty’s enduring reign.

A sense of dread coiled in Adia’s stomach as the situation spiraled out of control. Ayana’s plan to enter Memphis through the south gate, a backdoor attempt to avoid scrutiny, had unraveled before their eyes. Men on horseback, their polished armor glinting in the sun, had surrounded them.

“Lady Ayana,” the leader spoke, his voice surprisingly courteous despite the imposing presence of his cavalry. “We request you accompany us.”

Hanuku, ever the fierce protector, reacted instantly. His hand shot to his sword, its blade glinting menacingly in the afternoon sun. Wabi, mirroring his action, nocked an arrow on her bowstring, aiming with unwavering focus.

The leader held up a placating hand. “There’s no need for violence,” he assured them. “Sheathe your weapons, Lady Ayana. We mean you no harm.”

Ayana’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, her voice laced with suspicion.

“Your weapons will not be necessary,” the man reiterated, his gaze flickering to Hanuku’s drawn sword. Adia, her heart hammering against her ribs, couldn’t help but wonder where they were being taken. Could this be the end of their perilous journey? Was this the day her life would be tragically cut short? The silence stretched, thick with tension, as Ayana weighed her options. The glint of steel and the unwavering resolve in the soldiers’ eyes left little room for argument. Adia watched, a knot of fear tightening in her chest, as Ayana slowly lowered her arm, the clang of her sheathed sword echoing in the charged atmosphere.

Adia, despite her bravado, couldn’t deny a flicker of fear that danced in her stomach. Death, she had accepted as an inevitability, a truth whispered by the wind itself. Yet, the thought of dying young, her dreams of a family unfulfilled, gnawed at her. She yearned to live a long life, like her great-great grandfather Taha the Second, who had seen 109 summers.

“Hanuku,” she whispered, her voice barely audible above the pounding of her heart, “are we going to die?”

Hanuku, his jaw clenched tight, met her gaze with a steely resolve. “No, child,” he rasped, his voice a low rumble. “I won’t let that happen.”

Escorted away from the south gate, they were taken to the city’s west entrance. There, a man, his bearing exuding an air of authority, awaited them. He wore the

colors of the Kwame clan – a vibrant tapestry of ochre and emerald.

“Lady Ayana,” he boomed, his voice surprisingly gentle for such a large man. “I apologize for the unorthodox welcome. You see, news of your arrival preceded you.”

Ayana raised a skeptical eyebrow. “what’s the meaning of this?”

The man offered a polite bow. “Forgive me princess, I understand you may not be receptive to my assistance, yet here I stand, offering it once more.”

His gaze shifted to Adia, a hint of amusement flickering in his eyes. “And you must be Adia, daughter of Taha. A pleasure to meet you, Allow me introduce myself, I am Kwame, I am a friend to your auntie, you are safe now.”

Adia, bewildered by this unexpected turn of events, stammered a response. “Thank you,” she managed, her voice small.

Relief, a warm wave, washed over her. This Kwame, despite his initial aggression, seemed to pose no immediate threat. But a nagging question lingered in her mind. Why would a complete stranger intervene on their behalf? What game was he playing?

As they entered the sprawling city of Memphis, Adia stole a glance at Ayana, whose face remained an unreadable mask. The weight of unanswered questions hung heavy in the air, and Adia knew their journey had taken yet another unexpected turn.

A wave of relief washed over Adia as Kwame’s men ushered them not to a dungeon, but to a lavish guest

house. Wabi and her people were treated with respect, their needs catered to with an abundance of food and provisions. Even Hanuku, his scowl ever-present, was grudgingly allowed to follow Adia like a loyal shadow – a testament to the Alkeblan law protecting highborn individuals from separation from their protectors.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Kwame declared with a flourish, gesturing towards the opulent building before them. Rumor had it Kwame was the wealthiest man in Memphis, his fortune built on a lucrative spice trade that stretched from the shadowy kingdoms, Songhai, to the distant city of Thebes in the land of Khushaniss.

Adia, still bewildered by the turn of events, couldn’t help but ask, “Are you a chief, sir?”

Kwame chuckled, a warm sound that echoed in the grand entrance hall. “No, child. I’m a simple merchant, a servant to the people. The gods, in their infinite wisdom, have blessed me with a touch of Midas. Though some,” he winked, “might call me Lord Kwame.”

Adia’s jaw dropped as she took in the sheer grandeur of Kwame’s residence. Marble floors, polished to a blinding sheen, reflected the shimmering light filtering through diamond-encrusted windows. Golden ornaments adorned the servants, their shaved heads gleaming under the soft glow of oil lamps. Female servants, their movements as graceful as gazelles, swept forward to escort Adia to her chambers.

A sense of awe washed over her as she climbed a staircase crafted entirely of gold, the cool metal sending shivers down her spine. Her fingers brushed against the

smooth marble walls, coolness seeping through her heated skin. Finally, she reached her chamber – a haven of luxury beyond anything she could have imagined.

A magnificent bath, carved from wood and lined with gleaming copper, awaited her. Fragrant red petals floated on the steaming water, infused with exotic oils that promised a soothing soak. A young servant girl, her eyes wide with barely concealed curiosity, curtseyed deeply.

“My lady,” she chirped, her voice barely a whisper, “if you have any need at all, you have only to ask.”

Adia, overwhelmed by this unexpected turn of events, could only manage a small, hesitant nod. A hot bath, a comfortable bed, and a roof over her head – these simple luxuries, after weeks of hardship, felt like a dream. Yet, amidst the swirling emotions, a question lingered in her mind. Who was this enigmatic Kwame, and what role would he play in their perilous journey?

Adia surveyed the opulent chamber with a mixture of wonder and trepidation. It dwarfed her old rooms in Sunni, a stark contrast to the humble accommodations they had grown accustomed to during their arduous journey. Here, every conceivable comfort awaited her – a luxurious feather mattress draped in furs, plush chairs inviting relaxation, and a sturdy writing table equipped with quills and an inkpot. The familiar sight of these writing tools sparked a memory of the Chancellor’s room back in the king’s city, a place that now felt like a distant dream. Bowls overflowing with ripe peaches, plums, and pears sat on a side table, accompanied by a flagon of

wine and gleaming silver cups. A genuine smile, a rare visitor these past weeks, touched Adia's lips. She couldn't recall the last time she'd been treated with such lavishness.

The bath, a haven of steaming water and fragrant petals, had stretched on longer than intended. The urge to simply sink beneath the surface and forget the world was tempting, but the risk of drowning was a sobering reminder. Her thoughts drifted to her mother, a pang of worry gnawing at her. Did she know they were safe in Memphis? Could she somehow sense the hot bath, the luscious fruits, the comfortable bed that awaited Adia instead of the roasted rabbits and cold nights they'd endured?

After emerging from the bath, the attentive servant girls meticulously tended to her coily hair, their gentle hands weaving it into intricate styles. Left alone to rest, Adia sank into the plush mattress, a wave of exhaustion washing over her. Memories of Zahur flickered in her mind. He must be worried sick, she thought. As sleep gradually enveloped her, her thoughts drifted to her father, a silent plea for his safety echoing in the quiet chamber. Despite the luxurious surroundings and the promise of a good night's sleep, the weight of their situation continued to press down on her. Memphis, with its enigmatic host and unanswered questions, felt like a new chapter in their journey, one that unfolded with both hope and uncertainty.

Adia awoke to a delightful surprise. Draped across a chair sat a new dress, a stunning white tunic of Abyssinian silk. A memory sparked in her mind – she'd

seen castle women adorned in similar attire upon their arrival in Memphis. Curiosity piqued, she reached out to touch the fabric, the smooth silk sending a shiver down her spine.

Just then, the chamber door creaked open and two servant girls entered, their faces etched with a mixture of nervousness and eagerness.

“You’re awake, Princess,” one of them chirped, her voice barely a whisper.

Adia stretched, the remnants of sleep clinging to her like cobwebs. “How long have I been slumbering?” she inquired.

“The entire night, Princess,” the other servant responded, a hint of awe coloring her voice.

“We’re here to prepare you for breakfast, Princess,” the first girl added. “Lord Kwame has requested your presence.”

With practiced efficiency, the girls assisted Adia, transforming her into a vision of elegance. As she stood before the polished copper mirror, a gasp escaped her lips. The dress, perfectly tailored, accentuated her curves, and the intricate braids adorning her hair added a touch of regality. Yet, beneath the outward beauty, a knot of unease tightened in her stomach.

Gazing out the window, she took in the panoramic vista of Memphis. The sprawling city unfolded before her, a tapestry of bustling streets and towering structures. The white pyramid, a beacon of power, dominated the horizon, the Akyem sigil glinting proudly at its peak. But

amidst the grandeur, a chilling sense of isolation washed over her.

They were surrounded by strangers. She hadn't seen Ayana since their arrival, and the whereabouts of Hanuku remained a mystery. A pang of worry gnawed at her. Where could they be?

"Hanuku," she murmured, the name echoing in the vast chamber.

The servant girls exchanged a nervous glance. "Shall we proceed to breakfast, Princess?" one of them ventured, her voice barely audible.

Adia frowned, her newfound serenity dissipating. "Where is Hanuku?" she demanded, her voice laced with apprehension.

"We apologize, Princess," stammered the other girl, her eyes darting away. "Your… your manservant has been relieved of his duties. He is currently with the others outside the castle walls. But we are sure you will see him soon."

A bitter taste flooded Adia's mouth. "Ayana would never agree to this," she thought, alarm bells clanging in her head. "Something is terribly wrong."

The luxurious chamber, once a haven, now felt like a gilded cage. A knot of suspicion tightened in her stomach. This breakfast invitation, an act of hospitality on the surface, felt more like a summons. Adia knew, with a chilling certainty, that her journey in Memphis had just taken a dangerous turn.

Fury surged through Adia's veins. Hanuku was more than just a bodyguard; he was her sworn protector, an extension of herself. Alkeblan law was crystal clear – every prince and princess had a protector, a shield that remained by their side at all times, sharing meals and living quarters. These protectors swore an oath that transcended mere duty; it was a vow of loyalty until death, a life dedicated to safeguarding their charge. Marriage and children were out of the question, a well-known fact throughout the realm. Separating them was a blatant violation of this sacred law.

The memory of Hanuku's gruff but reassuring voice echoed in her mind: "Be cautious, Adia. Trust comes easily, but loyalty is earned." His words, once a general warning, now felt prophetic.

"Where is my aunt?" Adia demanded, her voice hardening with each passing moment. The facade of politeness had crumbled, replaced by a simmering anger.

The servant girl, clearly flustered, stammered, "S-she's waiting for you at the breakfast table, Princess."

Adia's eyes narrowed. This breakfast invitation, initially perceived as a gesture of courtesy, now reeked of manipulation. They had separated her from Hanuku, a clear attempt to isolate and control her. The luxurious room, once a symbol of comfort, now felt like a gilded cage.

Taking a deep breath, Adia straightened her back, her regal bearing returning. Breakfast could wait. Her first priority was finding Ayana and ensuring Hanuku's safety.

This forced separation was a blatant disregard for Alkeblan law, and Adia, far from being a docile guest, was determined to rectify this situation. The hospitality of Kwame now felt like a veiled threat, and Adia knew she had to tread carefully. The path ahead was shrouded in uncertainty, but one thing was clear – her time in Memphis was about to take a far more perilous turn.

Adia's heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat in the opulent silence. The breakfast scene, once a tableau of luxury, now morphed into a grotesque parody. The stoic male servants remained frozen at their posts, their usual presence now felt oppressive. Even the rhythmic clinking of serving platters seemed to mock her growing fear.

Ignoring Kwame's feigned concern for her well-being, Adia locked eyes with Ayana. Her aunt, once a proud warrior princess, sat stiffly beside Kwame, her face a mask of muted defiance. But in her downcast eyes, Adia saw a flicker of raw terror.

Kwame's words, dripping with a sickeningly sweet smile, shattered the fragile calm. "Your shield," he drawled, the casual dismissal of Hanuku sending a tremor of rage through Adia. "He's been… reassigned. A special task, you see. Delivering a message to your esteemed mother." His smile widened, revealing a glint of something far more sinister than warmth. "Unfortunately," he continued, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial purr, "he won't be returning."

The air crackled with unspoken threats. Adia felt a primal urge to lash out, to claw at this man who dared violate the sacred laws of Alkeblan. Yet, she knew blind fury would serve no purpose. She needed a plan, and fast.

“Guests,” Kwame continued, his gaze lingering on Ayana with a predatory gleam. “Perhaps I should rephrase. You and your aunt will be residing here for… an extended stay. And who knows,” he chuckled, his gaze fixed on Ayana, “perhaps your aunt will grace me with the honor of becoming one of my wives.”

The room seemed to shrink, the air thick with a suffocating silence. Adia’s mind raced. Separated from Hanuku, Ayana subdued, she was trapped in a gilded cage with a wolf disguised as a charming host. This unexpected turn of events reeked of a darker plot, a game where she and Ayana were unwitting pawns.

Beyond the opulent window, the city of Memphis pulsed with life, oblivious to the drama unfolding within these walls. Adia felt a surge of defiance, a desperate need to fight back. This was not the end, but a dangerous new beginning. She glanced at Ayana, a silent plea passing between them. They were in this together, and together, they would find a way out of this gilded prison. The air crackled with unspoken tension, a prelude to the storm that was about to break. The breakfast feast, a symbol of Kwame’s false hospitality, remained untouched, a chilling reminder of the perilous journey that lay ahead.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN CHIKU

They emerged from the forest into a clearing dominated by the village of Dunga. Its people, small in stature, eyed the Berbers with a wary curiosity. The brief respite was over. “We rest here tonight,” Manu’s gruff voice shattered the silence.

Chiku stirred awake to find the Berbers already past Dunga village. Where were they taking her? And what dangers lurked beyond this seemingly peaceful haven? The unknown sent shivers down her spine.

The Berbers unceremoniously dumped the crate onto a bed of dead leaves. Chiku squinted through a crack, her heart hammering against her ribs. The guards huddled together, their voices raised in a heated argument. The tension crackled in the air like a storm about to break.

Suddenly, a deafening clang of steel on steel pierced the tense silence. The sound moved with blinding speed, just outside Chiku’s limited view. Hope surged through her—could it be Damu, finally arriving? But dread quickly followed. The rapid clash of blades and grunts of exertion painted a grim picture.

She strained her neck, twisting within the confines of the crate, desperate to see. A horrific sight greeted her. The

Berber who had been carrying her lay sprawled beside the crate, lifeless. Her breath hitched. Who was fighting in the clearing? The metallic clanging continued, a terrifying symphony of violence.

Fear clawed at her throat. She whispered a desperate prayer to the gods, pleading for Damu's safety. Each groan that ripped through the air sent a tremor through her. The crate creaked open, revealing Manu's face, a mask of blood and fury. "Could he have killed Damu?" the thought echoed in her mind, a chilling possibility that hung heavy as she stepped out of her wooden prison.

Chiku's heart pounded like a trapped bird as she peeked out of the opened crate. Manu stood there, his face a grotesque tableau of dried blood and manic glee. Relief warred with suspicion. "You killed them," she hissed, the words tasting like ash in her mouth.

Manu's grin widened, but his eyes remained cold and unreadable. "You're welcome," he said, his tone dripping with mockery.

Manu's smile stretched into a cruel slash, his teeth glinting like a predator's in the dim light. "Misunderstanding, princess," he chuckled, wiping his bloodstained sword on his dead comrade's cloak. "Just a bit of disagreement."

“Treason,” Chiku spat, her voice trembling but laced with defiance. “A Moran killing another Moran is a capital offense in Azania.”

Manu’s single eye narrowed, the other hidden behind its leather patch. “Azania is a long way from here, little one. And you won’t be returning.”

His words hung heavy in the air, a death sentence pronounced with chilling finality. Chiku’s gaze darted toward the fallen Berber’s weapons. In a desperate gamble, she lunged for a scimitar, its weight nearly pulling her off balance as she grasped the hilt.

“Playing with fire, princess?” Manu sneered, his voice dripping with amusement. He moved with lightning speed, disarming her with a flick of his wrist. The scimitar clattered to the ground, the sound echoing in the tense silence.

Tears welled in Chiku’s eyes, but a spark of defiance flickered within. “I may be a girl,” she snarled, her voice cracking with rage, “but I’m not helpless!”

Manu barked a laugh, a harsh sound devoid of humor. “Then prove it.” He kicked the scimitar back toward her,

the blade skidding across the dirt. “Pick it up. Show me what the mighty princess of Azania can do.”

Chiku grabbed the sword, her grip trembling but firm. Fury surged through her, burning away the fear. This wasn’t a playful duel; it was a fight for survival. With a guttural scream, she charged at Manu, her form fueled by desperation and raw emotion.

Manu sidestepped her attack with practiced ease, his sword a blur as he deflected her clumsy swings. Chiku stumbled, the weight of the weapon and her own fear threatening to consume her.

“Eyes open, princess!” Manu roared, his voice a whipcrack. “Lesson one: never fight blind.”

Chiku reeled back, a wave of dizziness washing over her. Shame burned in her cheeks alongside the hot tears. She looked up, her gaze meeting Manu’s cold, calculating eyes.

He gestured with his sword, the blade glinting in the pale light. “Pick it up. Let’s see what the Ramshorn lioness is truly made of.”

The air crackled with tension. Chiku knew this wasn’t a fair fight. But neither did a cornered princess give up without a fight. With a newfound determination in her eyes, she grasped the scimitar, ready to face her tormentor.

Her mind raced. She needed a plan, a way to overpower this hulking brute. Memories of Bahati, the formidable Dinka warrior who fought alongside Damu, surfaced. Bahati’s strength and unwavering spirit had left an indelible mark on Chiku. But shame gnawed at her. Bahati, unlike Chiku, had fought valiantly to the bitter end.

Gripping the scimitar tighter, Chiku channeled her grief and anger into her movements. She mimicked Damu’s training techniques, her swings gaining a hint of ferocity. Manu, however, remained unfazed, effortlessly parrying each attack. Yet, Chiku refused to back down. This wasn’t just about survival; it was a fight for her pride, a tribute to Bahati’s teachings.

With a surge of determination, Chiku launched a series of unpredictable strikes, fueled by a desperate hope. But her lack of experience was a glaring weakness. Manu capitalized on her misstep, the tip of his blade finding its purchase at her throat.

“Sloppy and predictable,” he taunted, his voice dripping with condescension.

The weight of his words, laced with truth, crushed Chiku’s spirit. Overpowering him was a fantasy. Defeated, she relinquished the scimitar, the blade slipping from her trembling fingers. A flicker of amusement danced in Manu’s eyes as he sheathed his sword.

“Not a bad attempt, little princess,” he mocked. “Now get up. We have a long journey ahead.”

“Where are you taking me?” Chiku rasped, her voice barely audible.

Manu shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling with indifference. “Don’t know yet, but you’re walking.”

He turned and strode down the riverside path, his powerful legs eating up the distance. Chiku followed, her small frame dwarfed by his. Despair threatened to engulf her, but a flicker of defiance remained. She wouldn’t let Bahati’s memory fade. She wouldn’t surrender. This was just the beginning. The princess of Ramshorn would find a way to escape, a way to find Damu and Akina.

The path ahead was shrouded in uncertainty, but Chiku was determined to fight for her freedom. The day bled into dusk as they trudged through the dense Dunga forest, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and ripe fruit. Chiku trailed behind Manu, clutching a few stolen mangoes in the folds of her dress, their smooth skins offering a meager comfort against the growing chill. Hunger gnawed at her stomach, a constant companion on this forced march.

Manu, in contrast, seemed unfazed. He devoured the mangoes with relish, his sharp teeth tearing through the flesh with ease. His gaze frequently darted skyward, as if searching for something—or someone. He'd speared a couple of unsuspecting birds that now dangled from his belt, their lifeless bodies a grim reminder of Chiku's own helplessness.

They'd passed beneath a canopy of mango trees, their branches heavy with ripe fruit. Manu had barked orders, forcing Chiku to scramble up the rough bark, her hands scraping against the tree's surface as fear prickled her skin with each precarious climb. Each mango she plucked felt like a small act of defiance, but it did little to quell the gnawing fear in her gut.

"You have no idea where we're going, do you?" Chiku blurted, unable to contain her mounting anxiety. Her

voice echoed faintly through the trees, swallowed by the forest’s vastness.

“Keep walking,” Manu grunted, his reply as devoid of warmth as the fading sunlight filtering through the leaves. He cast another furtive glance at the sky, his brow furrowed.

Chiku followed his gaze, but saw nothing but an endless expanse of blue slowly bleeding into twilight hues. “Why do you keep looking up?” she persisted, a sliver of hope flickering within her. Perhaps there were answers to be found in the vastness above.

“Night approaches,” Manu muttered, his voice laced with a hint of unease that sent a shiver down Chiku’s spine. “We need shelter.”

“In these woods?” Chiku’s voice cracked with childish fear. The prospect of spending the night exposed to the unknown terrors of the forest was far more terrifying than anything Manu had thrown at her so far. She quickened her pace, reaching his side. “You can’t mean we’re sleeping here, can you?” she pleaded, her voice trembling.

Manu’s reply was a cold shrug. “Find your own shelter if you like,” he said, tossing another mango seed aside and snatching another fruit from her meager collection.

Chiku’s heart plummeted. Even a flimsy hut would be preferable to the dangers that lurked in the deepening shadows. But she was a princess, not a seasoned wilderness traveler. Despair threatened to engulf her, but a spark of defiance flickered in her chest. She wouldn’t give in to fear. She would find a way to survive this night, a way to escape this ruthless man. As darkness descended upon the forest, Chiku’s resolve hardened. This was just the beginning of her fight for freedom.

Darkness draped itself over the forest, as expected. A small fire crackled between them, its flames casting flickering shadows on the towering trees. A roasted bird, skewered on a stick, sent a delicious aroma into the air. Chiku savored a wing, the tender meat a welcome contrast to the meager rations of the past days. Manu, in stark contrast, devoured a whole bird with practiced ease, his movements efficient and deliberate.

For the first time since her capture, Chiku felt a flicker of something akin to freedom. The stifling crate was gone, replaced by the open expanse of the forest and the company of this enigmatic stranger. As she tossed the

gnawed bones into the fire, a sense of adventure, tinged with trepidation, bubbled within her.

“What happened to your eye?” she blurted out, her curiosity overcoming her fear. The question hung in the air, mingling with the crackle of the fire.

Manu paused mid-chew, his one eye glinting in the firelight. He studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “Enemy’s arrow,” he finally replied, his voice gruff but tinged with a weariness that hinted at a story untold.

Emboldened, Chiku pressed on. “Where did you learn to fight like that? The Berbers?”

Manu’s jaw tightened, and for a moment, she thought he might ignore her. But then he spoke, his voice low and measured.

A sardonic smile playing on his lips. “The Barbers took me in because I could already fight. My skills are honed from a different forge, far deadlier than anything they teach here in Alkebulan.”

Intrigue vied with wariness in Chiku’s gaze. “Where are you from?” she persisted.

“Songhai,” he replied, his voice laced with a hint of pride. “An empire across the red desert, where the finest swordsmen in the world are bred.”

An unexpected dream sparked in Chiku’s chest. “I want to be the best swordsman in the whole world,” she declared, her voice ringing with a newfound determination.

Manu chuckled, a low rumble that echoed in the stillness of the night. “That takes more than just a wish, little one. It takes relentless training, day after day, until your muscles scream and your spirit threatens to break.”

He stretched out on his back, his gaze fixed on the sliver of moon peeking through the canopy. Chiku followed his sight, a question hanging in the air. Despite the circumstances, a strange sense of camaraderie settled between them, a fragile truce forged under the vast Alkeblan sky. The path ahead remained uncertain, but for the first time, Chiku wasn’t facing it alone.

The night surrendered to a pale dawn. As Manu stirred awake, he was met with a surprising sight. Chiku, her face etched with fierce concentration, was already engaged in a vigorous sword dance. In her hand, however, was a stick, a poor substitute for a blade. She

swung and thrust with surprising ferocity, mimicking techniques etched into her memory.

Manu watched for a moment, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his one eye. Then, he spoke, his voice laced with a gruff indifference. “If you’re serious about learning swordsmanship, princess, you’d better do it right.”

Chiku whirled around, her stick held defensively. “I am doing it right!” she declared, a spark of defiance in her voice. “Bahati taught me this way.”

“Bahati taught you how to play with a stick, not wield a sword. You saw how the prince cut him like a bag of meat” Manu countered, his voice dripping with disdain. “Now come on, we move.” He buckled on his sword belt and strode off, leaving Chiku a memory she would rather not have.

She clenched her fists around the stick, her frustration warring with a newfound determination. Manu’s words stung, but a spark of Bahati’s spirit burned bright within her. She wouldn’t let this setback deter her. She may be a captive, but she wouldn’t be helpless. Gritting her teeth, Chiku followed Manu, the forgotten stick clutched tightly in her hand. The journey ahead was fraught with danger, but Chiku, the princess warrior, had taken her first step on the path to reclaiming her freedom.

Days bled into nights, the dense forest a relentless labyrinth. No villages, no signs of civilization broke the monotony of their journey. They scavenged for food – berries plucked from thorny bushes, rabbits snared with crude traps, and the occasional bird brought down by Manu's swift blade. Sleep came nestled in makeshift beds of leaves, a far cry from the luxurious comfort of Chiku's chambers at Ramshorn. Yet, under the vast expanse of the Alkeblan sky, she discovered a resilience she never knew she possessed.

Every morning, afternoon, and evening, Manu transformed into a relentless drillmaster. He schooled her in the Zarma swordsmanship of his homeland, Songhai. His instructions were harsh, his expectations unforgiving. But beneath the gruff exterior, Chiku glimpsed a flicker of something she couldn't quite place. Was it respect, grudging admiration for her tenacity?

One evening, as the dying sun cast long shadows across the forest floor, Manu returned with a surprise. He tossed an object at her feet with a grunt. It wasn't the familiar stick, but a true wooden sword – a replica of the weapon she'd once wielded back in Ramshorn. It had a proper grip, a guard, and a pommel, but the weight felt daunting in her small hands.

A thrill of excitement surged through Chiku, warring with a gnawing anxiety. This wasn't just a practice session; it was a turning point. The wooden sword, a tangible symbol of her forgotten privilege, felt foreign yet strangely familiar. As she gripped the hilt, a steely resolve hardened in her eyes. This was her weapon now, and she would master it. The path to freedom, she realized, was paved with sweat, discipline, and maybe, just maybe, a begrudging alliance with the one-eyed warrior who held her captive.

Manu's head snapped back in a surprised scoff. "Wrong! This isn't a two-handed club, princess. A sword wields in one hand."

Chiku grunted, hefting the wooden blade. The weight felt oppressive, threatening to pull her arm from its socket.

"Heavy, is it?" He smirked, a hint of amusement flickering in his one eye. "Good. It needs to be. Builds strength, teaches balance. One hand, that's all you need."

With a begrudging nod, Chiku shifted the sword to her left hand. Manu seemed pleased, a grudging respect replacing his initial annoyance.

“Left hand,” he muttered, his voice low and thoughtful. “Unorthodox, but can confuse your opponents. Now, your stance. Not that. Turn sideways, present a smaller target.”

He circled her, a predator assessing its prey. “Skinny, good,” he grunted. “Agility is your advantage. Now, grip.”

He leaned closer, his presence filling the space between them. Chiku’s breath hitched as he pried her fingers open with surprising gentleness, rearranging them around the hilt. His touch sent a tremor through her, a mix of fear and something else she couldn’t quite define.

“Relax,” he murmured, his voice a husky rasp. “Don’t squeeze the life out of it. Deftness, that’s what you need. The sword becomes an extension of your arm. Can you drop your arm? No. Same with the sword. Fifteen years, princess. Fifteen years I’ve sold my blade to chieftains across Songhai, Alkebulan, even the Jagan-infested Hollow Lands and the Mansa tribes of the Smoking Jebel. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. Listen, learn, and you might just become the deadliest blade these lands, or any beyond, have ever seen.”

Manu’s words hung heavy in the air, a dark promise laced with an undercurrent of something more complex. Chiku met his gaze, a flicker of defiance mingling with a

growing sense of trepidation. The path to freedom, she realized, was paved not just with sweat and discipline, but with the teachings of a ruthless warrior with a shrouded past. And whether this training would empower her or consume her remained to be seen.

Manu stood opposite her, a single wooden sword held loosely in one hand, the other resting casually behind his back. “Enough talk, princess,” he growled. “Let’s see what you’ve learned. Remember, this isn’t the clumsy flailing of Alkebulan. This is Songhai swordsmanship – swift, silent, a whisper of death for your enemies.”

He took a measured step back and raised his own wooden blade in a mock salute. “Attack.”

Chiku lunged, fueled by weeks of frustration and a deep-seated desire to prove herself. But her strikes, honed through countless mornings, afternoons, and evenings, found nothing but air. Every muscle in her body screamed in protest, a testament to the relentless training. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, how many times she heard Manu’s barked commands – “One hand! Sideface! Keep your head up! The sword is an extension of your arm!” – her blade never connected.

Sweat beaded on her brow, stinging her eyes. Shame burned in her chest, a hot ember refusing to be extinguished. Was she truly this inept? Was Manu right?

Was she destined to remain a helpless child, forever at the mercy of this infuriating one-eyed warrior?

But beneath the frustration, a flicker of something else flickered within her. A spark of defiance, a stubborn determination not to let Manu break her spirit. She gritted her teeth, channeling her anger into renewed focus. Perhaps victory wouldn't come today, but she wouldn't give up. The princess of Ramshorn wouldn't be reduced to a whimpering failure. One day, she would master this Songhai style, and when that day came, she would be ready. Ready to face whatever challenges awaited her, and perhaps, even ready to face Manu himself.

Days bled into weeks, and Chiku took Manu's gruff instructions to heart. Long after he retreated for the night, she'd rise under the cloak of darkness, the wooden sword a familiar weight in her hand. She practiced in the quiet solitude, fueled by a burning desire to improve. Each morning, Manu would leave her to her self-directed training while he ventured out to hunt.

On the sixteenth day, their journey took an unexpected turn. A dusty road emerged through the dense foliage, leading them to a sight that stole Chiku's breath away. Paje, a small town nestled amidst towering mountains, was home to the Kanuri people. Unlike the grand castles of Ramshorn or the imposing holdfasts of Kirua, Paje

exuded a different kind of charm. Here, happiness bloomed in the vibrant town square, a stark contrast to the regimented life she'd known.

These Kanuri people were a revelation. Short in stature, they possessed elongated, pointed ears and prominent noses, features unlike anything she'd encountered – not even in Akina's vast collection of books. A pang of longing pierced her heart. "Akina would have loved to see them," she thought wistfully.

The sight of bustling life, so different from the wilderness they'd traversed, stirred a flicker of hope within Chiku. Paje, like any other Alkebulan town, boasted taverns. Manu, with Chiku trailing behind, her wooden sword (a gift from him) secured on her belt, entered one such establishment.

They found a table and settled in. A Kanuri woman, her long, pointed ears and oversized feet unmistakable, approached them. Chiku couldn't help but steal glances at the woman's features, a flicker of shame washing over her. The woman, oblivious to Chiku's scrutiny, boomed, "Travelers, eh? What can I get you?"

"Everything you have," Manu declared, his voice leaving no room for argument.

Chiku remained glued to her seat, her gaze darting around the tavern, taking in the sights and sounds of this new world. A sharp rap on the table startled her.

“Stop staring,” Manu’s voice was a low growl.

Chiku flinched, a surge of anger battling with a newfound awareness. This town, these people, represented a world beyond her captivity, a world she yearned to explore. But freedom remained a distant dream. For now, she was bound to Manu, forced to learn his deadly swordsmanship. Yet, a seed of defiance had been planted. The princess of Ramshorn wouldn’t be a mere spectator forever. She would bide her time, learn what she could, and wait for the right opportunity to seize her freedom.

A feast materialized before them. Vivid red mushrooms drew Chiku’s eye, their novelty tempting her to devour them with gusto. Manu, on the other hand, tackled a mountain of food – black beans, succulent chicken, skewered goat meat, vibrant pumpkin, hearty yams, and various leafy greens. He devoured flatbreads made from cassava and millet, leaving no morsel untouched.

But it was the rolled fish skin, a dish Chiku dubbed “fish balls”, that truly captivated her. The taste was unlike anything she’d experienced – a symphony of textures and

flavors. “We don’t have this in Khanduus,” she remarked, a wistful smile playing on her lips.

The next course arrived, a plate piled high with something crunchy and brown. Manu grinned, his one eye gleaming with amusement. “Grasshoppers,” he declared, his voice thick with amusement.

Chiku wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Insects?”

“A delicacy here,” he chuckled, popping a handful into his mouth.

Hesitantly, Chiku followed suit. The grasshoppers, surprisingly crispy and savory, exploded with an unexpected burst of flavor. Soon, she found herself digging into the plate with gusto, a newfound adventurous spirit blossoming within her.

The drinks arrived next. Manu opted for a potent Kanuri pineapple wine, while Chiku received a glass of what appeared to be simple banana juice. But a sly glint in Manu’s eye betrayed his intentions. As Chiku sipped, she detected a subtle hint of pineapple wine mixed in, the flavors clashing on her tongue. Was it a playful prank, or something more sinister?

The next morning, a throbbing pain greeted Chiku as consciousness slowly returned. She awoke to an unsettling silence. No sign of Manu, no bustling Kanuri townsfolk. Disorientation washed over her as she took in her surroundings – a deserted beach, jagged rocks jutting from the coastline, and a distant moat hinting at a hidden fortress. Panic clawed at her throat. How had she ended up here, alone on this seemingly isolated island?

The chilling truth dawned on her – Zanziba.

But where was Manu? Had he abandoned her, or was something more at play? The weight of uncertainty settled on her like a suffocating cloak. Yet, amidst the fear, a spark of defiance flickered to life. Chiku, the princess of Ramshorn, wouldn’t crumble. She would unravel the secrets of this island, find Manu (or a way off the island), and carve her own path to freedom. This forgotten corner of Alkebulan, Zanziba, held a new set of challenges, but Chiku, the princess warrior, was ready to face them. The island breeze ruffled her hair, carrying the faint scent of salt and the promise of a perilous adventure. Her journey had taken an unexpected turn, but one thing was certain: Chiku of Ramshorn was no longer a captive princess. She was a survivor

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AKINA

“Where am I?” she asked, her voice a mere tremor in the suffocating darkness. A cold, damp wind slithered against her skin, carrying the faint scent of decay.

“The realm of the dead,” a voice answered, high and thin, like scraping bone against stone. It seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at once, sending shivers down Akina’s spine.

Her heart hammered a frantic tattoo against her ribs. “Realm of the dead! Am I dreaming again?” A desperate plea, laced with a sliver of hope.

“You will never dream again,” the voice replied, a chilling whisper that seemed to caress her very soul. Panic, cold and sharp, clawed at her throat.

“Who are you? Why am I talking to you? And why is it so dark?” Akina’s voice trembled, barely a whisper lost in the endless night.

A dry, rasping chuckle echoed in the darkness. “The dead need no light,” it hissed. “They see through darkness, their eyes forever open to the secrets of this realm.”

“Who are you?” Akina pleaded, her voice hoarse with terror. The formless entity before her felt ancient and powerful, radiating an unsettling coldness that seeped into her bones.

“I am your guide,” the voice rasped, swirling around Akina like a whirlwind of shadows. “Your guide to what comes next.”

Three brown and round eyes, burning like fire in the absolute darkness, pierced through Akina’s fear. They locked onto hers, unwavering and hypnotic. “I’ve seen those eyes before,” she thought, a tremor running through her. Cat eyes, yes, but unlike any cat she’d ever encountered. These held an ancient wisdom, a chilling awareness that sent shivers down her spine. Panic gnawed at the edges of her consciousness. “Dreaming again, just like the black herons,” she muttered, the memory of that unsettling dream flashing before her eyes.

But unlike the dream on the trader’s ship, this felt different. More real. A cold dread seeped into her bones as she realized this wasn’t a dream. This... this was something more.

The three-eyed cat, its form barely discernible in the gloom, padded closer. It brushed against her legs, the fur surprisingly soft against her skin. A surge of conflicting emotions flooded her. Terror, primal and instinctive, threatened to consume her. Yet, a sliver of curiosity, as illogical as it seemed in the face of such a terrifying creature, flickered to life. Why did this creature, with its knowing gaze, feel strangely familiar?

Akina’s voice cracked as she forced out the question, “Are you really a cat?”

The three burning eyes blinked, and the creature’s reply was equally unexpected. “Are you truly dead?”

A tear escaped Akina’s eye, tracing a cold path down her cheek. “I am dead, it’s over for me.” Her voice was a mere whisper lost in the suffocating darkness.

The cat’s form shifted slightly, a low groan rumbling from its unseen throat. “It’s the beginning for you,” it rasped. “You shed your old life to embrace a new one. Like a seed buried in darkness, you must die to be reborn.”

Akina’s brow furrowed. “Reborn? I don’t understand.”

“It is not yours to understand yet,” the cat replied, its voice laced with a strange amusement. “Just as I never understood why I was granted three eyes.”

“So you are a cat with three eyes,” Akina managed, clinging to a shred of normalcy.

The cat chuckled, a dry, unsettling sound that echoed in the darkness. “I have appeared to many, in many forms. A wolf guarding the gates, a crow whispering secrets, a serpent shedding its skin. For a thousand years, I have taken the form most suitable for the soul I guide. To you, I am a cat.”

Despair threatened to consume Akina. “This is a dream, a cruel one,” she choked out. “I can’t wake up from it, can I? Perhaps if I scream, Damu might hear me…”

Her scream tore through the darkness, raw and desperate. But there was no answer, no echo, nothing but the oppressive silence. The cat’s fur brushed against her leg once more, a chilling counterpoint to the emptiness around her.

“Embrace the darkness,” the cat rasped, its voice strangely insistent. “Close your eyes and see.”

Akina’s breath hitched. “I can’t,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “The dead need no light.” But a sliver of doubt flickered within her. Could there be truth in the cat’s words?

Akina’s mind reeled, the disembodied voice’s pronouncements echoing in the suffocating darkness. It was the only sound, the only companion in this endless night. A horrifying realization dawned on her – she couldn’t remember when the voice started, or if anyone else heard it. A cold dread seeped into her bones. Was she truly dead?

Exhaustion gnawed at her, a formless weight pressing down on her spirit. The voice, however, seemed tireless. It spoke of purpose, of a new beginning, but Akina clung to the one fragment of memory she possessed – a promise made by Damu.

The rhythmic swaying of the palanquin, which had lulled her into a numb acceptance of her fate, finally ceased. A sliver of light pierced the oppressive gloom, pulling a gasp from Akina’s lips. The darkness had been all-encompassing, but this... this was different. It was a distant beacon, a promise in the night.

Through her blurry vision, Akina saw Damu and his companions alight from the palanquin. They stood at the edge of a dusty path, gazing towards a colossal structure in the distance. It was the lighthouse of Thonis, a solitary giant against the backdrop of the town. Countless windows seemed to pierce its rocky facade, climbing

from its base to a dizzying height where a blazing torch flickered defiantly.

“They say that flame never dies,” Betho, one of Damu’s companions, remarked in awe. “Just like the ones at the Redwall in the North.”

The Redwall. The name sparked a flicker of recognition in Akina’s fading memory. It was a place of sanctuary, a fortress spoken of in hushed tones, a symbol of hope in a world shrouded in shadows. But why did it resonate with her now?

“If it wasn’t for you, Damu,” Betho continued, his voice thick with loyalty, “I’d be stuck in those wretched kitchens back at the Wall, slaving away for some brute. I’ll follow you anywhere, my lord.”

A sharp cough escaped Bahati, another companion. “He doesn’t fancy such titles,” he muttered.

“In my tribe,” Betho defended himself, oblivious to the veiled warning, “all highborn are addressed as lord or lady.”

Akina tried to focus on their conversation, the camaraderie offering a fleeting warmth in the face of her chilling isolation. Yet, her gaze remained fixed on the lighthouse, that unwavering flame a beacon in the unknown.

Nine days of relentless travel culminated in their arrival at Thonis, a town Akina had dreamt of visiting since childhood. The flickering lighthouse, a beacon in the distance, had fueled her yearning to study the arcane arts and become a revered oracle, just like her tutor

Seydou had prophesied. Now, a cruel twist of fate had extinguished that dream – Akina was dead.

Damu, burdened by grief, grappled with his own unspoken vow. Akina's final plea echoed in his mind: find Chiku, her fiercely independent sister. Guilt gnawed at him – he had to fulfill this promise, his loyalty to Akina unwavering. "Chiku's strong," he thought, a sliver of hope battling the despair. "She can survive on her own."

Dusk had painted the sky in hues of orange and purple as they crossed the imposing metallic bridge – a marvel of engineering that ground shut each night and reopened with the dawn. Towila, Kito, Monkeyface, and Damu carried Akina's body in the chariot, escorted by a group of waiting eunuchs.

Inside the towering structure that housed the lighthouse, the air hung heavy with the scent of aged books, exotic inks, and papyrus crafted from dwarf trees. An unsettling mosaic depicting the "Doom of Khushanis" adorned the entry hall, its colored glass casting an eerie glow under the flickering light of red and green iron lanterns lining the walls.

An unsettling silence pressed down on them. Where were the esteemed oracles Akina had revered? What secrets did this place hold?.

Another eunuch, his face shrouded in shadow, awaited them outside a dark chamber prepared for Akina's body.

"It's awfully dark in here," Kito grumbled, his voice echoing nervously in the stillness.

“The dead need no light,” the eunuch replied, his voice devoid of emotion. “Darkness is their new light.”

His words sent shivers down Damu’s spine. This wasn’t a place of healing or arcane knowledge – it was something far more sinister.

“The sister may stay for one night,” the eunuch corrected himself. “The rest of you, however, must return.”

A wave of protest threatened to erupt from Towila, but before she could speak, the eunuch addressed Damu directly. “Your chamber has been prepared, sir. Please follow me.”

Damu hesitated. A fierce loyalty burned within him. “No,” he said, his voice firm. “am leaving. Let her stay in my place.”

The eunuch considered him for a moment, then inclined his head in a curt nod.

“Be safe, Commander Damu,” Towila pleaded, her voice thick with worry. “And please, bring her back.”

With a heavy heart, Damu and the others followed the eunuch out of the lighthouse, the fading light of dusk swallowed by the encroaching night. Towila stood alone, a lone sentinel guarding Akina’s body in the oppressive darkness.

A knot of unease tightened in Damu’s stomach. What horrors did this place hold? And more importantly, what would become of Akina’s body *“I will bring Chiku back”* he thought of saying the words.

A Whisper in the Darkness

“Open your eyes, embrace the darkness as your new light,” the disembodied voice echoed in Akina’s mind, its words like thunder in a storm.

“How can darkness be light?” she rasped, the question a mere tremor in the suffocating blackness.

“You are the light in the darkness,” the voice replied, enigmatic and unsettling. “And the darkness, the source of your newfound power.”

Days bled into one another as Akina’s body lay in the dark chamber. The eunuch had tended to it with a strange reverence, washing away the grime and binding the wounds inflicted during the prince’s brutal assault.

“This is most peculiar,” the eunuch muttered, his brow furrowed in confusion. “The flesh feels life-like, yet there’s no pulse.”

Two days prior, he had discovered strange markings etched onto Akina’s skin – shimmering lines that pulsed with an otherworldly luminescence.

Towila, her vigil unwavering, approached the eunuch, her voice laced with concern. “What does it mean?”

The eunuch shook his head, a veil of helplessness clouding his features. “Her body seems tethered to the living realm, yet her heart beats in the rhythm of the dead. That much I can discern.”

“And the markings?” Towila pressed, her gaze fixed on Akina’s form.

The eunuch’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I have never encountered anything like them. Perhaps the Principal Eunuch holds the key to this mystery.”

A sliver of hope flickered within Towila. The Principal Eunuch, with his vast knowledge of arcane secrets, might be able to unravel the enigma that was Akina. But would their time run out before he could decipher the markings and unlock Akina’s fate?

The lighthouse loomed before them, a defiant sentinel against the encroaching darkness. Its sheer size was staggering – a testament to the ingenuity of the Principals and their scholars. More than just a beacon for sailors, it was a fortress, its thick walls of limestone, blackstone, and redstone a formidable defense against invaders from the Red Sea. Long battlements encircled its base, guarding the vast compound within. Endless corridors snaked through its depths, leading to chambers stacked like a colossal honeycomb. The very heart of the lighthouse pulsed high above, a blazing torch known as the “Beacon of the Sea.”

For three days, Akina’s body had resided in the level reserved for the deceased and those afflicted by rare maladies. Now, a shift was underway. They were transporting her to the scholar’s dome, a stark contrast to the grim chamber where she’d lain.

The dome itself was a curious sight – a sphere constructed entirely of black and white stone. Inside, scholars both young and old toiled away, the elder ones marked by the mysterious Nyansapo symbol on their foreheads.

“Why don’t you possess the symbol?” Towila inquired with a hint of arrogance.

An older scholar chuckled, his voice raspy. “The Nyansapo, child, is bestowed upon those who have dedicated their lives to unraveling the mysteries of the realm and all it encompasses.”

He gestured towards Akina. “We shall take over from here. You may leave now.”

As Towila exited the dome, a young man with fiery determination caught her eye. He clutched a massive book, its weight seemingly straining his lean frame. Behind him followed an elderly man, his presence radiating authority.

“The Head Principal,” the eunuch murmured, bowing deeply.

A hush fell as everyone bowed their heads in reverence. The marble doors hissed shut, leaving Towila alone in the corridor. The fate of Akina and the secrets etched upon her skin now rested in the hands of the enigmatic Principal and his scholars. What answers would they unearth? And what would become of Akina in this place of profound knowledge and hidden power?

Akina’s eyelids fluttered open, revealing a scene both familiar and strange. The imposing silhouette of Ramshorn Castle loomed before her, yet the once-lush grounds surrounding it were barren.

“Ramshorn,” she breathed, her voice rough with disuse. “But where are the trees?”

A chilling rasp echoed beside her. “A different Ramshorn,” the three-eyed black cat replied, its voice laced with an ancient wisdom. “A different time.”

Akina’s gaze darted down to her own body, a gasp escaping her lips. Her skin was adorned with intricate markings – symbols and words in a language beyond her comprehension. Patches of vibrant leaves seemed to sprout directly from her flesh. A surge of energy coursed through her, and with a tentative leap, she found herself airborne, moving with an unnatural swiftness.

Panic mingled with a strange sense of wonder. “What is happening to me?” she cried.

“You are becoming,” the cat purred, its voice resonating with power. “You are learning to navigate the currents of time, to dance between the realms of light and darkness. You can move through the elements – wind, earth, and thought itself. You are the new oracle, Akina, but your potential is raw, unrefined.”

A tremor of awe and fear ran through her. Oracle. The very title echoed with responsibility and power. But the path ahead was shrouded in mystery. Akina, once a simple girl with dreams of wizardry, now stood at the precipice of something extraordinary. The question remained – was she ready to embrace this strange new destiny?

Akina soared through the air, the wind whipping through her hair. Beside her, the black cat had transformed into a magnificent black heron, its wings keeping pace with her own newfound flight. Glancing down, Akina’s breath caught in her throat. The ground rushed up at her, a

dizzying blur of greens, browns, and blacks. Yet, a strange clarity washed over her. Fear receded as she beheld the world unfolding beneath her like a living tapestry.

Her vision encompassed the entire realm – past, present, and future – laid bare before her. Ramshorn sprawled below, its once-imposing walls reduced to mere lines in the dirt. The trees she once cherished stood level with the grass, the distant hills where she'd played with friends now shrunk to miniature bumps. The tall towers of the castle appeared squat and ungainly from this vantage point.

A figure caught her eye – an elderly Guru on the castle balcony, his brow furrowed as he peered through a polished bronze tube, meticulously recording his observations in a book. In the courtyard below, a young man, strong and vibrant, practiced his spear drills.

Driven by an unknown impulse, Akina turned her gaze north. A galley ship sliced across the azure expanse of the Nubian Sea. But a tremor of unease ran through her. A storm brewed on the horizon – a raging tempest, dark and violent, crackling with unseen lightning. The oblivious sailors held no inkling of the impending danger.

Pushing her sight further north, she reached the bustling towns of Benghazi and its people. Beyond them, the majestic castle of Carthage loomed, its Dinka guards patrolling the grounds and spearmen preparing for an unseen conflict.

A wave of dizziness overwhelmed Akina. The sheer volume of information, the glimpses into countless lives, threatened to consume her. The world stretched before her, a vast and intricate tapestry teeming with stories. But amidst the wonder, a chilling realization dawned – this newfound power came with a heavy burden. The future was not set in stone, and the choices people made could unleash devastating consequences. Could she, the newly awakened oracle, learn to navigate this sea of knowledge and use it to steer the realm away from the brewing storms?

Akina's mind echoed with the heron's cryptic words: "pass through time at the speed of light and darkness." The phrase held a deeper meaning now, as her vision pierced the veil of time.

She saw Damu, her loyal friend, leading his warriors through a dense forest, their faces etched with determination. A pang of worry lanced through her. Where were they headed? What dangers lurked in the tangled undergrowth?

The vision shifted, revealing her father, his face etched with grief, pleading with a cold and imposing figure – Belkis. A wave of helplessness washed over Akina. What terrible secret did Belkis hold? Why did despair cloud her father's eyes?

The scene dissolved, and another emerged – Adia, her once radiant face streaked with tears, her body wracked with silent sobs. Beside her, Chiku, her wild sister, stood stoic, a mask of defiance hiding a torrent of emotions.

What sorrow bound them both? What secret did Chiku hold close to her heart?

A sense of dread settled in Akina's stomach. Shadows clung to those she cared about – Belkis, Zahur, Chiku, Adia, her brothers… a chilling premonition of danger. One shadow, monstrous and dark, emanated an evil that sent shivers down her spine. Another, radiant and armored like the sun, seemed to offer a sliver of hope. Yet, a looming giant, clad in impenetrable rock armor, its empty visor a gaping maw of darkness, cast a long shadow over them all.

Akina's vision expanded further, encompassing vast stretches of land. She saw the free cities of Ait Benhaddou nestled amidst black-green mountains, hiding from slaver towns. The Khushani and Theban kingdoms stretched before her, and beyond the black sea, the mysterious lands of the Bantu people.

The sheer immensity of it all threatened to overwhelm her. This wasn't just the realm; it was a world teeming with life, conflict, and hidden secrets. But amidst the awe, a chilling realization dawned. Akina wasn't merely a spectator – she was a witness to the future, a bearer of burdens yet to be understood. Could she decipher the cryptic messages woven within these visions? Could she use her newfound power to shield those she cared about from the impending shadows? The weight of responsibility settled heavily upon her, and a single question resonated in the vast emptiness – was she truly ready to become the oracle?

This passage is a powerful culmination of Akina's journey. Here's a revised version that builds on the emotional weight, foreshadows future conflicts, and sets the stage for the next chapter:

Whispers from the Beyond

Finally, Akina turned her gaze north, towards a sight that chilled her to the bone. The legendary Moat, the Wall of Gods, shimmered in the distance, radiating an unnatural heat that rivaled the Khandhus forges. Beyond it lay a vast expanse of uncharted territory – endless forests, desolate plains dotted with lifeless gray and black lakes, and meandering rivers twisting through what appeared to be a graveyard of land. This, Akina realized with a shudder, was the domain of storms, the aptly named "Storm Kingdoms." Black volcanic peaks pierced the ashen sky, casting long shadows over valleys where nothing dared grow except for the ceaseless dance of lightning and thunder.

Akina pushed her vision further, past the boundaries of light. There, at the precipice of the known world, lay a realm shrouded in impenetrable darkness. A primal fear gripped her heart, a chilling whisper creeping through her like a poisoned blade.

"Now you know," the heron, perched beside her, spoke in its raspy voice. "Now you understand why you must embrace the darkness, why you must live."

"Why?" Akina rasped, fear constricting her throat.

"For the storm is coming," the heron replied, the words echoing with a dreadful certainty.

The phrase “storm is coming” sent a jolt through her. Was it a reference to the Taha prophecy? Akina’s gaze darted back to the heron, its three eyes piercing through her. One of them, the third one, seemed to hold an ocean of terrifying knowledge.

“How can I live when I’m dead?” she whispered, her voice trembling.

“The girl in you has died,” the heron said. “But the oracle can be reborn. You must take my eye, inherit its power, and claim your new existence.”

A commotion erupted below, the first sound Akina had heard in what felt like an eternity. “We must get her out of here!” a voice called out, filled with urgency. “The Principles will dissect her!”

“Take the eye,” the heron urged, its voice firm yet laced with an underlying tenderness.

“I… I don’t know how,” Akina stammered.

“Repeat after me,” the heron instructed. “I accept the eye of the realm, I am the new oracle.”

Akina echoed the words, her voice gaining strength with each repetition. The heron shimmered, dissolving into a swirling cloud of gray mist that enveloped her. It was as if a veil had been lifted. Akina gasped as her surroundings materialized – the stark walls of the dome, flickering candlelight battling the encroaching shadows. And there, before her, stood Towila and a young scholar, their faces etched with worry and determination.

Akina, the oracle reborn, had stepped onto the precipice of her new destiny. The storm loomed on the horizon, but

now, armed with newfound power and a purpose etched in darkness, she was ready to face it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BELKIS

Eight days Zahur has been gone. Eight agonizing nights Belkis had spent within the confines of the Great Pyramid, yearning for the familiar warmth of Khanduus. The Memphis night, unlike its Khanduusi counterpart, brought no respite. It was a relentless, bone-chilling entity that seeped into her bones despite the valiant efforts of Chieftain Cudjoe to maintain a comfortable warmth within her chambers.

The white city, a stark contrast to the vibrant hues of Khanduus, was a sprawling labyrinth of limestone buildings, their pale surfaces gleaming coldly under the unforgiving desert moon. Narrow alleys snaked between the structures, their shadows twisting and contorting in the pale moonlight. The air hung heavy with the scent of dust and brine, a sharp contrast to the sweet, heady fragrances of Khanduus' bustling marketplaces.

Memphis, perched on the banks of the Nile, was a city that thrived on trade. The river, a ribbon of silver under the moonlit sky, pulsed with life. Boats of all shapes and sizes bobbed on its surface, their lanterns casting a warm glow that danced on the water. From a distance, the faint cacophony of the marketplace reached Belkis' ears – a symphony of haggling voices and the rhythmic thud of deliveries. Despite the distance, it was a sound

that both comforted and tormented her – a reminder of the life that thrummed just beyond the confines of her isolating chambers.

Belkis watched a lone raven circle the peak of the Great Pyramid, its harsh cry echoing through the sterile halls. The ebony bird was a portent of ill omen, a fitting herald for the news that arrived moments ago. Chieftain Cudjoe, once a mountain of a man, was confined to his bedchamber, wracked by a sudden illness that sapped his strength.

Belkis had witnessed the slow, insidious creep of age on the Northern leaders. It was a cruel twist of fate – a gift of extended life poisoned by the frailty that accompanied it. She'd seen the struggle etched on Cudjoe's face as he strained to navigate the steps of his own pyramid, the ever-present wince as he lowered himself onto his throne. Now, even his bedchamber seemed a world away.

Cudjoe was the linchpin, the fragile thread holding the uneasy peace between the Kushite and Taha factions. His absence cast a long shadow over the city. Belkis' mind churned with worry. "If he dies," she thought, her brow furrowing, "this fragile peace will shatter."

Unease gnawed at her. She barked a curt order to her waiting handmaiden. "Send word to Matamba. Tell the Morans to be on high alert." The crisp desert wind whipped sand against the windowpanes, mimicking the turmoil within her.

The piercing shriek of a horn shattered the tranquility of the night, ripping Belkis from her dreams. A cold dread

coiled in her stomach as she bolted upright, the white widow's veil brushing against her face. Through the window, she glimpsed flickering torchlight dancing across the courtyard, casting grotesque shadows on the palace walls. Muffled shouts and the clatter of armored feet echoed through the halls, a stark contrast to the usual serenity of her chambers.

Belkis knew instinctively that something was terribly wrong. Her mind raced, piecing together the unsettling puzzle of recent events. It all began with Zahur's departure. In his absence, whispers had reached her ears concerning Damram Cudjoe, Chieftain Cudjoe's ambitious niece. Unease settled over Belkis as she recalled Damram's veiled advice to expel the Taharans from the city and his clandestine meetings under the cloak of darkness.

The news of Damram receiving a hefty sum of money for an unknown prisoner further fueled Belkis's suspicions. Tonight, she had planned to investigate Damram's frequent rendezvous with a mysterious Lord Kwame outside the palace walls. But with the unexpected chaos erupting within the palace, her plans were thrown into disarray.

With a steely glint in her eyes, Belkis issued a curt command to her handmaiden, Rhoko. "We leave for the south holdfast. Gather the others and meet me beyond the gardens, near the south gate." Her voice was laced with urgency, leaving no room for argument. Belkis knew time was of the essence. The source of the commotion remained unknown, but one thing was certain – danger lurked within the White City.

Belkis pressed herself deeper into the shadows, her heart hammering against her ribs. A throng of prisoners shuffled past her hiding spot, their faces illuminated by the flickering torchlight. Each captive wore a look of defeat and pain, their bodies slumped in weary resignation.

A tall figure emerged from the procession, his posture surprisingly rigid despite his captivity. He was clad in crimson armor, a glint of silver catching the firelight from a passing torch. A surge of hope, wild and exhilarating, shot through Belkis. Could it be Zahur? The resemblance was uncanny.

But as the figure drew closer, bathed in the harsh torchlight, Belkis's hope dissolved into a chilling realization. The emblem emblazoned on his armor wasn't the locust sigil of her husband's house. It was a silver eagle – the unmistakable insignia of Chieftain Cudjoe. These weren't Taha prisoners; they were Cudjoe's own men.

A wave of nausea washed over her. What had transpired within the palace walls? What dark secret lurked at the heart of this chaos? The festive air of the night had morphed into a chilling tableau of violence and betrayal. Belkis knew instinctively that she was on the precipice of a devastating truth, one that could shatter the fragile peace of the White City.

The procession of prisoners stretched on, a seemingly endless human chain shuffling under the harsh glare of torches. Belkis abandoned any attempt to count them, the sheer number staggering somewhere beyond fifty.

Their crimson and brown garments were smeared with dust and blood, the flickering light making it difficult to decipher the badges and sigils adorning their chests. But some faces were unmistakable. Asaman Nana, the wiry advisor with his perpetual frown. Amaya Kese, the stoic treasurer with her signature silver necklace. Akumfi Ameyaw, the boisterous war chief with his booming voice – all members of Cudjoe’s inner council.

A cold certainty settled in Belkis’s gut. The sight of these men, stripped of their authority and dignity, confirmed her worst fears. Cudjoe, the ailing chieftain who held the fragile peace of the White City, must be dead. Panic gnawed at her. Cudjoe’s absence was a vacuum, a power struggle waiting to erupt. Though their relationship wasn’t one of blind loyalty, Belkis knew that under Damram’s rule, the fate of the Kushites wouldn’t be a peaceful coexistence. “She’d unleash chaos upon us, a puppet on the Kushites’ strings," Belkis thought grimly, her resolve hardening. This unexpected turn of events demanded decisive action.

The holdfast, usually a haven of bustling activity, was eerily quiet. A few men sat listlessly on the veranda, their mugs untouched, their faces etched with worry. They barely glanced at Belkis as she entered, their minds preoccupied with the unfolding events. Rhoko and the others materialized at her side, their faces grim. “He’s dead,” Rhoko confirmed, her voice barely a whisper.

Belkis swallowed the lump in her throat. Cudjoe’s demise cast a long shadow over their plans. “We need to leave,” she declared, her voice laced with urgency. “But first, I need answers about this Lord Kwame.”

They slipped out through the postern gate, a hidden doorway in the south wall, bypassing the commotion engulfing the city center. As they emerged, the familiar chaos of the White City assaulted them. People scurried through the streets, their panicked shouts echoing through the air. Abandoned children huddled in doorways, whimpering softly. In stark contrast to the holdfast's somber mood, drunken brawls erupted in alleyways, and brazen prostitutes solicited customers under flickering oil lamps.

Belkis surveyed the scene with a practiced eye. This was a city on the brink, the fragile order shattered by Cudjoe's death. But amidst the pandemonium, she had a mission: to unravel the mystery of Lord Kwame before the power vacuum left by Cudjoe consumed everything.

The horses pawed impatiently, their breath puffing out in white clouds against the cool night air. Belkis swung into the saddle, urging her mount forward with a nudge of her heels. They clattered down Mbanza Lane, the rhythmic thud of hooves echoing off the cobblestones. A few shadowy figures darted into darkened alleys at the sound, but none dared confront them.

This wasn't the White City Belkis was accustomed to. Here, in the labyrinthine alleys beyond the palace walls, a different reality reigned. Potholes gaped like hungry maws in the road, choked with smoke and the stench of decaying flesh. Sparsely populated, these were the city's forgotten corners, aptly dubbed the "kill zone." Whispers spoke of a chilling truth – anyone caught here after the evening bells fell silent was as good as dead. This brutal decree had brought a semblance of peace to

Mbanza, albeit a gruesome one – the number of bodies found in these alleys had reportedly quartered.

Belkis scanned the deserted street as they rode towards a solitary tavern perched on a distant hill. Darkness claimed every window, their shutters fastened tight. No sound reached them other than the mournful howl of the wind whistling through the alleys. If Damram, power now likely in her grasp, had discovered her absence, surely someone would be tailing them by now. A flicker of uncertainty crossed Belkis's mind. "Perhaps," she mused, "I'm of no use to her anymore. Dead or alive."

They continued their journey, bathed in the cool moonlight, the rhythmic clatter of hooves the only sound against the oppressive silence of the kill zone.

The tavern bustled with activity, a stark contrast to the deserted streets they had just traversed. Men and women alike huddled around wooden tables, mugs of ale raised in boisterous laughter. A Somali bouncer, his shaved head gleaming in the dim light, ushered them inside with a curt nod.

"We should head for Matamba, my lady," Rhoko urged, her voice laced with concern. "At least we have some semblance of security there."

Belkis shook her head, a frown creasing her brow. "Something doesn't sit right. Ayana should have been here by now. This is the one place refugees would congregate, and I haven't heard from Zahur in days. I can't simply abandon them."

“I’m certain Lord Zahur is safe,” Rhoko reassured her, though a hint of doubt flickered in her eyes.

A serving woman approached their table, her smile strained. She set down several mugs of ale, their frothy heads threatening to spill. “Perhaps you’d like something to eat, my lady? We have a hearty stew and fresh bread.”

Unbeknownst to Belkis, a woman named Wabi sat at the next table with her companions. Their conversation had piqued her interest. Leaning forward, she addressed Belkis directly.

“Are you by chance the lady mother of Adia?”

Belkis’s head snapped up, her gaze locking with Wabi’s. This unexpected encounter sent a jolt through her, and she studied the woman intently, trying to decipher her identity and motives.

“This is Lady Belkis Taha of Khanduus,” Rhoko interjected, her voice laced with protectiveness. “Wife to Chieftain Zahur Taha, Warden of the North, and indeed, the lady mother of Adia. How do you know of her?”

Wabi’s explanation sent a surge of relief and urgency through Belkis. “We traveled here with them,” she said, “along with Adia’s aunt and her shield-bearer, Hanuku. Where are they?”

“Some lord took them,” Wabi replied. “We were promised payment upon delivering them safely to Memphis. I trust you have the coin?”

Belkis’s eyes narrowed. “You will be paid double what they promised,” she vowed, “but only if you tell me where they are right now.”

“Upon arrival, a lord, some powerful figure, took them to his castle,” Wabi explained. “They fed us and then cast us out, denying us further entry.”

“Take us to this castle,” Belkis ordered, determination hardening her voice. “And your payment will be yours.”

Rhoko, ever the pragmatist, cut in. “Lord Kwame is expecting a specific wine for his wedding festivities,” she said, aiming her words at the tavern keeper. “Unfortunately, we were unable to procure it from the free cities of Ait Benhaddou. You see, the lord is taking a new wife, a princess no less. Chieftains from across the land will be attending, and this rare vintage is a must-have. Perhaps you can offer a suitable replacement?”

The tavern keeper’s eyes flickered with skepticism. “Lord Kwame expects no visitors at this late hour,” he said gruffly.

“Then we shall return,” Rhoko conceded with a feigned sigh. “Perhaps you can explain to him why his rare wine remains unacquired. I see you don’t believe my tale.”

The tension in the air was thick, a dangerous dance between veiled threats and the desperate pursuit of information. Belkis’s heart pounded with a mixture of hope and fear. Adia, her daughter, could be within reach, but at what cost?

The ploy with the rare green vintage appeared to work. The soldier, his eyes gleaming with anticipation at the mention of the famed Ait Benhaddou wine, wasn’t alone. His gaze darted towards Rhoko and the mules laden with casks.

“Ever sampled the green vintage from Ait Benhaddou?” he asked, his voice laced with curiosity. “They say it’s the finest in all of Alkebulan.” With a flourish, he extended a hand towards the casks. “Perhaps you’d allow us a taste?”

Rhoko, ever the resourceful one, uncorked a cask, revealing the emerald-hued liquid within. The soldiers exchanged glances, their skepticism momentarily suspended by the allure of the exotic wine. Finally, one soldier yielded to temptation, taking a tentative sip from a proffered horn.

A satisfied smile spread across Rhoko’s face as the soldier savored the taste. After a moment’s hesitation, the gate creaked open, granting them passage into the castle compound. Belkis and the others, who had been cleverly concealed within the casks, emerged as they passed the guards, undetected.

“Honestly,” Rhoko muttered, a hint of amusement in her voice, “we could have achieved this without resorting to such theatrics.”

Belkis, however, remained focused on the task at hand. “There’s no time to waste,” she said resolutely. “We need to find the kitchens.”

Even in the dead of night, the lord’s kitchen pulsed with a life of its own. The rhythmic kneading of dough, the clinking of pots, and the steady sizzle of cooking meat painted a symphony of culinary activity. A lone figure, a foreign chef with a boldly shaved head and a handlebar mustache that spoke of years of experience, stood hunched over a steaming cauldron.

As Belkis and Rhoko entered the kitchen, the chef whirled around, his eyes widening in surprise. He dropped to his knees in a gesture of abject apology.

“Where is Lord Kwame’s chamber?” Belkis demanded, her voice brooking no argument. The time for subtlety was over. They had infiltrated the castle, and now, they were determined to find Adia.

The climb felt endless. They ascended the servants’ stairs, the dim light revealing a maze of corridors and dusty tapestries. Finally, they emerged into the grand hall, a vast space dominated by a long oaken table and ornate chairs. Chandeliers glittered from the high marble walls, casting a warm glow on their path.

Following the cook’s silent guidance, they reached the top of a grand, sweeping staircase crafted from gleaming gold. The cook, his face etched with a mixture of fear and relief, pointed towards a massive oak door at the landing.

Taking a deep breath, Rhoko reached out and slowly creaked open the door. Inside, bathed in the soft glow of an oil lamp, lay Lord Kwame. He was fast asleep, his chest rising and falling with each thunderous snore. Beside him, chained to the bedpost by her wrist, was Ayana. Her eyes fluttered open, relief battling confusion as she saw Belkis and Rhoko.

Before Kwame could stir, Belkis was at his bedside. The tip of her spear, cold and deadly, pressed against his jugular vein.

“Tell me,” she hissed, her voice laced with icy fury, “is my daughter within these walls? Because I will take her home, even if it means carving a path through your flesh.”

Kwame’s eyes widened in terror. He stammered, “Forgive me, my lady. Adia... she is not here. She left nights ago. I treated her with the utmost respect, like a princess, I swear!”

Disbelief and a flicker of hope warred within Belkis. Her spear wavered for a fraction of a second, but any lingering doubt vanished as Ayana spoke.

Tears streamed down Ayana’s face as she recounted the events of the past few days. Kwame’s hospitality had been a ruse, a cage gilded with false promises. Adia had vanished, and there was no choice but to flee Memphis.

Yet, a stubborn defiance flickered in Belkis’s eyes. “We cannot leave Akan behind,” she declared, her voice ringing with steely resolve. “We will remain here, gather our forces, until every banner of Khanduus stands united. I will find my daughter, and my husband, one way or another.”

The weight of her words hung heavy in the air. The rescue had been a bittersweet victory, but the fight for her family and her home had only just begun.

The wind whipped across the desolate plains, carrying the faint scent of salt from the distant sea. Huddled before the imposing stone walls of Mijikenda, a city renowned for its impregnable defenses and fierce warriors, stood Belkis and her contingent. Their journey

north had been long and fraught with danger, but the fate of Khanduus hung in the balance.

Belkis, her usually regal posture hardened by adversity, approached the heavily guarded gate. Her voice boomed across the courtyard, echoing between the towering walls. “May I remind you, Chief Manu, of your oath? Your loyalty sworn before the gods and sealed with your sword – to protect the North, to answer the call of war alongside my husband, the Warden! Do you intend to break this sacred pact, Chieftain?”

The air crackled with tension. Within the fortress, Chief Manu, a wizened figure draped in golden robes, sat upon his throne. His piercing green eyes, a hallmark of the Mijikenda tribe, scrutinized Belkis with a mixture of weariness and regret.

“Lady Taha,” he spoke, his voice raspy with age, “I had hoped to see my final days in peace. I am no oathbreaker, but a man yearning for a respite from bloodshed. Yet, even peace has its limits. One foolish act, they say, can topple the most delicate balance.”

He paused, his gaze flickering across Belkis and her sister. “I cannot ignore your plight, nor the storm brewing over the horizon. War seems inevitable, a relentless tide no man can truly hold back.”

Belkis’ heart pounded a fierce counterpoint to the wind howling around them. Manu’s words offered a glimmer of hope, a crack in the wall of her anxieties.

“Chief,” she called out, her voice filled with a newfound resolve.

Chief Manu leaned forward, a flicker of determination sparking in his aged eyes. “My son will lead his warriors to stand beside you,” he declared. “The gates of Mijikenda shall open for the North’s cause.”

A wave of relief washed over Belkis. With each pledge of support, the path ahead seemed a little less daunting. “Thank you, Chief Manu,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Together, we shall face the coming storm and safeguard the future of Khanduus.”

The great gates of Mijikenda creaked open, a symbolic gesture of alliance. Belkis knew the journey ahead would be fraught with peril, but with the warriors of Mijikenda at her side, she felt a renewed sense of purpose. The fight for her home, her family, and the future of the North had officially begun.

Rain lashed against the windows of the chamber, an unheard-of event in the Aksumite city. The normally sun-baked streets were transformed into a muddy quagmire. Belkis, confined to this room with Ayana, cared little for the color of the walls or the discomfort of the damp floor. Her heart ached with the desperate yearning to find Zahur, Adia, and Chiku. Hami, at least, was safe – his recent letter spoke of leading a thousand Nubian soldiers gifted by King Piya, marching towards Aksum. But the rest of her children were scattered across the realm, vulnerable and alone.

On the third rain-soaked morning, a new arrival brought a flicker of hope. The Hembinda of Himba, a clan renowned for their fierce warriors, entered the city with a thunderous flourish. Three hundred mounted warriors

led the procession, their cloaks billowing in the wind. Behind them marched a formidable force of nearly two thousand Himba foot soldiers, their spears tipped with polished steel that gleamed like a promise of retribution in the pale sunlight that finally pierced the clouds.

Belkis stood at the window of the great hall, her eyes fixed on the approaching column. A lone figure walked ahead, his rhythmic drumming echoing through the streets. The deep, guttural boom of a massive drum, larger than the drummer himself, pulsed with a primal energy, a call to arms that reverberated within Belkis' very core. With each booming beat, a sliver of her despair chipped away, replaced by a fierce determination. The Hembinda had arrived, their presence a testament to the unwavering bonds of loyalty forged in times of peace. Perhaps, with their help, she could find a way to reunite her family and reclaim her home.

The Himba prince, a figure of imposing stature, rode at the forefront of his contingent. His steed, adorned in the vivid hues and gold of their war regalia, mirrored the prince's own air of regality. Flanking him were his brothers, Ijanda and Tjimone, their figures silhouetted against brown banners emblazoned with a potent symbol: two spears crossing beneath a blazing sun. Legends whispered of the Himba's lineage, tracing their blood back to the very first men, and their appearance bore testament to these ancient tales. Towering figures with powerful builds, their faces were framed by thick, dark beards, and their hair, meticulously styled, was colored a rich, earthy brown. The elite amongst them,

the royal blood and highborn, were distinguished by cloaks fashioned from the pelts of prized animals.

Unbeknownst to Belkis, a tense exchange was unfolding nearby. Chief Manu, his gaze fixed on the approaching Himba, materialized beside her.

“Is this the storm the Tahas have been warning of?” he inquired, his voice laced with a hint of apprehension. “Your father sent word. Damram is displeased, it seems. He’s granted me a mere three days to cast you out, or face the wrath of his army upon my city.”

He handed her a letter, its seal bearing the familiar sigil of House Taha. Belkis’ eyes scanned the document, a deep breath escaping her lips as she recognized the weight it carried.

“We will be prepared when Damram arrives,” she declared, her voice ringing with newfound resolve. “Lalibela is bringing provisions. Open your stores, Chief Manu. We face this storm together.”

With a determined stride, Belkis turned away, leaving the chief to contemplate the coming conflict. The Himba’s arrival marked a turning point. Their presence not only bolstered their forces but served as a potent symbol of unity against Damram’s tyranny. Belkis knew the fight ahead would be arduous, but with allies like these by her side, a flicker of hope ignited within her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DAMU

The wind whipped through the skeletal branches of the baobab tree, whistling a mournful tune in the gathering dusk. Fish-Neck clutched his axe, its smooth handle slick with drizzles despite the bone-chilling air. Beneath the meager protection of the baobab's sprawling roots, his companions huddled together for warmth. Kito, a wiry young Dinka warrior, pressed his calloused hands against his bare chest, trying to tame the tremors wracking his body. Kaka, a slight young man with eyes the color of polished obsidian, burrowed deep into the unforgiving earth, his thin frame still wracked with uncontrollable shivers.

Two suns had set and risen since Damu and Monkey-Face vanished into the unforgiving expanse of the Kilifi. Damu's heart, heavy as a polished ebony mask, ached with a relentless, gnawing worry. He was caught in a snare of responsibility. One side tugged at him, urging him to find Chiku, his spirited younger sister, who had been taken on orders of the crown Prince. The other, a primal echo in his blood, called him north to Aksum, to stand beside his brother and rescue their father and Adia, his other sister, from whatever unknown danger awaited them. Guilt, a bitter ash in his mouth, gnawed at the edges of his resolve. Should he have prioritized one sibling's plight over the other?

He couldn't shake the dread that gnawed at him for Damu and Monkey-Face. Whispers of hyenas cackling in the dead of night and tales of elusive leopards stalking the twilight fringes of the Kilifi echoed in his mind. The thought of facing those dangers alone sent a shiver down his spine that rivaled the cold. But the thought of losing

anyone else... that was a prospect too terrifying to contemplate.

“My brother is riding to war, and I should be with him,” Damu confessed, his voice thick with anguish. “He matters.”

Monkey-Face, ever the calming presence, placed a reassuring hand on Damu’s shoulder. “I know what you’re going through, brother. Whatever you decide, we are with you.”

Damu ran a hand through his hair, his brow furrowed in worry. “I never thought I’d face a choice like this.”

“Perhaps this is fate’s hand, a test from the gods,” Monkey-Face offered. “Your father and sister have Hami and Belkis, the full force of the north behind them. But Chiku, who does she have? You are her only brother, Damu. Remember that.”

Damu’s heart clenched. He knew Monkey-Face was right. Chiku needed him desperately. Yet, a part of him yearned to be at his brother’s side, to lend him his strength. Hami, a scholar by nature, was no warrior. Respect in the north ran on the edge of a blade, something Hami sorely lacked.

The image of his brother faded as Chiku’s face filled his mind. He couldn’t abandon her.

“Ait Benhaddou!” Damu exclaimed, a newfound determination flaring in his eyes. “My sister must be there! They must have taken her to the free cities, it’s the only place that makes sense.”

Monkey- Face, ever the voice of reason, countered, “My lord, that’s beyond the White Sea. Have you ever even been to the free cities? We’ve been together all your life, and this is as far as we’ve ever ventured. Do you even know the road to Ait Benhaddou?”

A spark of hope ignited in Damu’s eyes. “We’ve always talked about going beyond the seas, seeing the cities beyond, the Aswan city girls you admire. Remember? She could be there.”

“She could be,” Monkey-Face conceded, “but there’s also a chance she isn’t.”

“It’s a chance we have to take,” Damu insisted, his voice resolute. Kicking his heels into his horse’s flanks, he galloped down the dusty path. Kilifi, the nearest town, was their first stop.

Weeks ago, before their ill-fated encounter in the Tombs Valley, they had faced bandits who tried to steal their horses and coin. Others sought the bounty on their heads. Many perished in those skirmishes, and the survivors returned home wounded. News of their exploits spread like wildfire, and the reputation of the “Bastards of the South” preceded them.

Three days later, under a fiery sunset that cast long shadows from the mudbrick houses, Damu and his companions reached the crossroads. A sudden bang rattled a loose shutter, making Damu instinctively reach for his sword, Nightbringer. He chuckled sheepishly at the startled looks he received – it was just the wind whipping through the narrow alleyway.

After the open expanse of the river shore, the closeness of the town felt suffocating. The air hung heavy with the smells of woodsmoke, baking bread, and the pungent aroma of fish drying in the afternoon sun. As they passed between tightly packed houses, their upper stories adorned with intricate latticework, a glimpse of a vast lake ahead quickened Damu's pulse. He urged his horse forward, surging past Kito, Kaka, and Thimba.

Bursting onto the grassy sward beside the pebbled shore, he reined in his mount, mesmerized. The setting sun painted the tranquil water surface a shimmering copper, casting long fingers of crimson and gold across the rippling waves. "This is the farthest I've ever been," he thought, a knot of wonder and trepidation tightening in his stomach.

The lake stretched before him, seemingly endless, its far shore lost in the hazy distance. To his left, a rambling inn, its weathered wooden exterior adorned with colorful flags, jutted out over the water on sturdy wooden pilings. The rhythmic creak of the inn against the gentle lapping of waves promised a comforting haven. To his right, a long pier, its planks worn smooth by countless footsteps, stretched like a beckoning finger into the vastness of the lake. Further east, the town embraced the lake with a series of docks like grasping wooden arms, their decks piled high with crates and fishing nets. The air was filled with the lively shouts of bartering merchants and the rhythmic thwack of hammers from a nearby shipyard.

"This town is a ghost," Ali muttered, his voice echoing eerily in the deserted streets. "Everyone's gone."

Just then, Chacha, who had been scouting ahead, rode back. “There’s a holdfast to the east, like a small castle,” he called out. “Maybe we can find food and shelter there.”

A flicker of hope ignited in Damu’s eyes. “Good thinking, Chacha. Let’s check it out. Akan, you’re with me.” The three companions spurred their horses towards the imposing structure that rose in the distance.

Back at the shore, Damu surveyed the sorry sight of the only boat in sight – a broken, abandoned rowboat. Disappointment gnawed at him. He knew in his gut that searching the town further would be futile.

Dejected, he dismounted and knelt by the lake, the cool water lapping softly against his legs. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows and painting the sky in hues of orange and purple. Fireflies, like tiny blinking stars, began to emerge from the twilight, their brief flashes illuminating the desolate scene. The rhythmic chirping of frogs filled the air for a moment before a sudden croak sent the fireflies flitting back into hiding.

As darkness settled, Chacha and Akan returned, their faces etched with a mixture of relief and weariness. “There are people at the holdfast,” Chacha announced. “An old man took us in. He even promised us a feast – goose, chicken, and the freshest fish from the lake.”

A glimmer of hope flickered in Damu’s eyes. Food, shelter, and perhaps even information – the holdfast might just be the turning point they needed.

“We may not have a boat,” Damu conceded with a sigh, “but at least the tavern offers some solace – goose, chicken, and fresh fish.” The thought of a hearty meal after days on the trail brought a welcome rumble to his stomach.

Fish-neck, ever the resourceful one, chimed in, “We could try patching up that old rowboat. Maybe it’ll hold us four.”

Damu considered it for a moment. “That might work as a temporary solution,” he admitted.

Ali, brimming with enthusiasm, piped up, “We could find nails in town, and there’s plenty of wood around. We could even build proper boats!”

Damu snorted, amusement softening the harsh lines of his face. “You know anything about boat-building, Ali?”

Ali’s bravado faltered, and he sheepishly scratched his head.

“A raft,” Bahati offered, a practical glint in his eyes. “Anyone can build a raft. We can use long poles to push ourselves across.”

Damu’s brow furrowed in thought. While a raft seemed feasible, there were limitations. “The lake’s too deep for poles to reach the bottom in most places,” he pointed out. “And rafts aren’t exactly ideal on rivers. We need to get to Kirua, but that would mean staying in the shallows near the shore… and leaving the horses behind. It might be our only option. I’ll sleep on it and decide in the morning.”

Betho, his youthful optimism ever-present, piped up, “Can we stay at the tavern tonight?”

“Most definitely,” Damu assured him. “Food and rest are what we need most right now.”

The tavern bustled with activity. A few patrons nursed their drinks at the worn wooden tables, while others sprawled unconscious, overtaken by fatigue or intoxication. Damu and his host, the old man from the holdfast, stood amidst the din, their conversation continuing in hushed tones.

The old man eyed Damu and his companions with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. “What brings you northerners to these parts?” he rasped, his voice rough with age.

Tails, ever the pragmatist, cut to the chase. “We seek shelter and sustenance,” he declared.

The old man’s gaze narrowed. “That’ll be three cowrie shells each,” he croaked.

With a nod, Monkey-Face snagged a vacant table, the others following suit. The atmosphere in the tavern was thick with a haze of smoke and stale ale. The patrons, a rough-looking bunch, paid the newcomers little attention. A few shuffled out into the night, their silhouettes swallowed by the darkness. Others simply slumped onto the floor wherever they found space, their snores adding to the cacophony. Those who had previously occupied the tables remained sprawled unconscious, oblivious to the world around them.

The food arrived eventually – a simple yet hearty meal of boiled chicken, sweet potatoes, vibrantly colored pumpkins, black yams, and a side dish of gnats. Black wine, served in chipped mugs, completed the offering.

As they ate, a high-pitched voice sliced through the din. A wizened old pygmy perched on a stool near the hearth had been observing the exchange between Damu and the tavern owner. “Perhaps you should consider hiring some help,” he piped up, his voice surprisingly strong for his stature.

The tavern owner’s face contorted in a scowl. “A pygmy telling me how to run my business?” he barked.

“Apologies, old man,” Fish-Neck interjected placatingly. “He meant no disrespect.”

The pygmy, however, bristled. “I wasn’t speaking out of turn! He seems like a disagreeable sort,” he declared, gesturing towards the tavern owner.

Monkey-Face chuckled, a hint of amusement dancing in his eyes. “Seems like love is a rare commodity around here. Speaking of which, old man,” he addressed the tavern owner, “where can we find a place to sleep?”

The old man shrugged indifferently. “Anywhere you like,” he muttered, his gaze flickering back to the pygmy with a flicker of annoyance.

“Apologies,” Fish-Neck interjected placatingly. “He meant no disrespect.”

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The old man shrugged indifferently. “Anywhere you like,” he muttered, his gaze flickering back to the pygmy with a flicker of annoyance.

Damu’s mind was a whirlwind of worry. Thoughts of his lost sister Akina, Chiku who could be anywhere, his brother Hami stuck in the north, his stepmother Belkis, and his sister Adia all swirled in his gut. But above all loomed the image of his father. He envisioned his father’s weathered face, his vulnerability in the cold dungeons of Cairo. A question gnawed at Damu: why hadn’t his father fought back during his arrest?

Whispers reached the south, painting a humiliating picture: the great Zahur, captured without a fight, his men slain.

“Why wouldn’t he fight?” Damu muttered, the question echoing in the hollowness of his stomach.

These thoughts swirled in his head until exhaustion finally claimed him. He drifted off to sleep, only to be jolted awake by Fish-Neck’s urgent whisper.

“We’re surrounded,” Fish-Neck hissed, his eyes wide with alarm.

Damu shot upright, his heart pounding. He scanned the room. The patrons who had been sprawled on the floor and tables – gone. An unsettling silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the crackling fire in the hearth.

Damu and his companions were alone. A sense of dread coiled in his gut. This deserted tavern, the unsettling whispers about his father's capture – it all felt like a trap closing around them.

"Step out slowly, leave your weapons behind or the Imp gets it!" a gruff voice boomed from outside.

Thimba's voice, a tremor barely above a whisper, reached Damu's ears. "They have the Imp! I don't know how they got him out."

Monkey-Face's eyes narrowed. "The old man," he muttered, the accusation heavy in his voice.

The tavern door creaked open, revealing a contingent of royal soldiers, their armor glinting in the firelight. Among them stood the old man from the tavern, his face hidden behind the broad backs of the soldiers. A sense of betrayal burned in Damu's gut.

They were escorted out of the tavern and into the night air. Damu blinked, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings for the first time. The tavern stood on the outskirts of a small village, a cluster of tightly packed mudbrick houses nestled amidst the trees. As the soldiers herded them forward, some villagers scurried indoors, slamming their doors shut. Others peeked from behind shuttered windows, their faces etched with fear and curiosity.

They were brought before two mounted figures at the head of the troop. The man in the lead, clearly the commander, wore a long sword sheathed at his belt. His finely crafted leather armor marked him as a high-

ranking soldier. His gaze landed on Damu, a flicker of recognition passing through his hardened eyes.

“Which one of you is the twin who murdered the Crown Prince?” he demanded, his voice booming across the dusty clearing.

Damu held his breath. This commander, with his air of authority and refined attire, seemed a world apart from the ragtag soldiers surrounding him. Perhaps, Damu thought, he was even a highborn himself.

The commander continued, his voice low and dangerous. “You look like someone who values his life. So here’s the deal: release the Imp, turn your horses, and ride back from whence you came. Maybe you’ll see another sunrise. Go home to your mothers, wives, and children. Refuse, and you all die. I don’t want to add any more highborns to my tally.”

A portly man on a nearby horse guffawed, a jarring sound in the tense atmosphere. He seemed second-in-command, his armor less polished and his features less distinguished.

Damu’s mind raced. They were outnumbered and surrounded. His gaze darted between the soldiers, searching for a weakness, a flicker of doubt. He knew he had to make a choice – comply, fight, or gamble on something even more desperate.

“Look at us,” the fat man jeered, his voice dripping with malice. “We outnumber you ten to one!”

Damu ignored the boast, his gaze fixed on the commander. He needed a distraction, a split second of chaos. A question formed in his mind.

“Who wants to take him?” he called out, gesturing towards the Imp, who squirmed nervously under the watchful eyes of the soldiers.

Monkey-Face, ever the opportunist, grinned. “I’ll gladly take the little pest off your hands. He talks too much and happens to have a nice, shiny axe.”

A tense silence descended upon the clearing. The soldiers exchanged confused glances, the commander’s brow furrowed in suspicion. Was this some kind of trick?

The crisp morning air carried the sounds of the village awakening. Tendrils of smoke curled from chimneys, signifying the start of breakfast fires. In the distance, a dog barked incessantly, its reason lost in the pre-dawn fog. A gaggle of naked children, their bellies round and full, watched from a safe distance, their fingers poking inquisitively at their noses.

“Fighting on an empty stomach is a fool’s game,” Towila muttered, her voice barely a whisper. The strange mushrooms she’d consumed the night before were churning in her gut, a gnawing discomfort that mirrored the rising tension.

The commander cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “There are fifty cahoolies for each of your heads,” he declared, his voice heavy with authority. “And I promised my wife a new house before our son arrives. You see why I have no choice but to take you alive… or dead.”

Monkey-Face chuckled, a sound that lacked humor. “And did you promise your wife that you would return home every day?”

The commander stiffened, a flicker of unease crossing his face. “Of course,” he blustered, trying to regain his composure. “A husband keeps his promises.”

“Then you’re a liar,” Monkey-Face countered, his voice laced with venom. “Because you won’t be returning to her today.”

Damu saw his chance. A surge of adrenaline coursed through him. “Towila,” he called out, his voice ringing clear. “I’m famished too. Let’s finish this quickly. Aim for the fat one and the two on the flanks. On my signal…”

Damu’s words hung heavy in the air, a beat before the world erupted into chaos. A muffled grunt escaped the fat man as a spear materialized from the morning mist, piercing his chest and sending him tumbling from his horse. The two soldiers flanking him crumpled under a hail of arrows, their surprised cries echoing in the stillness. Another arrow found its mark, burying itself deep into the neck of the soldier closest to the commander.

Steel met steel in a cacophony of clangs and parries. Swords sang their deadly song as the fight spilled out of control. The Imp, caught in the crossfire, crumpled to the ground, a spear protruding from his chest. Was he dead? Damu couldn’t tell amidst the swirling chaos.

The villagers, emboldened by the unexpected ambush, threw themselves into the fray. Armed with whatever

they could find – spears, axes, even shovels – they charged at the remaining soldiers, their faces twisted in a mixture of fear and fury. Women, their wailing rising above the din of battle, rushed forward, scooping up the seemingly lifeless Imp and carrying him away from the carnage.

The battle raged in the muddy field, a gruesome dance of death. Villagers fell, their bodies littering the ground alongside the slain Kushit soldiers. Blood stained the once-pristine grass, turning it a macabre shade of crimson.

Damu, a whirlwind of fury, found himself facing off against the commander. Their blades clashed, sending sparks flying. Sweat streamed down Damu's face, his muscles screaming in protest. But fueled by a desperate need to survive, he fought with unwavering determination.

A rhythmic chanting rose from the throng of villagers, their voices merging into a powerful chorus. "Die, die, die Kush! Die..." they stomped their feet in unison, the pounding a steady counterpoint to the clash of steel.

The fight between Damu and the commander was a brutal ballet of attack and defense. They circled each other warily, each searching for an opening. Finally, Damu saw his chance. With a feint and a powerful thrust, he disarmed the commander, the man's sword clattering to the ground.

The villagers' chant reached a crescendo. Damu, his heart pounding, raised his own sword. The villagers held their breath, anticipation heavy in the air.

The story of this fight, as would be told by the villagers, would morph and change over time. Different versions would circulate, each one embellished with fantastical details. But the truth was this: Damu emerged victorious. The commander fell, his head separated from his body in a single, swift stroke.

Damu stood panting amidst the carnage, the weight of his actions heavy on his shoulders. The villagers, their faces a mixture of relief and horror, surrounded him. They had won, but at a terrible cost. The battle for freedom, it seemed, had just begun.

The aftermath of the battle was grim. The tavern owner lay lifeless amongst the carnage, his greed a footnote in the broader struggle. The villagers had already stripped the establishment bare, taking what they needed to survive. Thankfully, the women who had rescued the Imp had managed to stabilize him, even though he remained motionless and pale.

“Is he dead?” Fish-Neck’s voice trembled with worry.

A young woman, her hands stained crimson but her eyes resolute, shook her head. “Not yet. But if he doesn’t receive proper healing...” her voice trailed off, the unspoken implication hanging heavy in the air.

“Can you heal him? We’ll do whatever it takes,” Damu pleaded, desperation etching lines on his face.

The woman shook her head again. “Not here. This place is tainted now. We need to reach the Black and Red Temple of the Dwarves.”

Damu’s brow furrowed. “And can you heal him there?”

Another firm nod from the young woman. “They possess ancient magic. There’s a chance.”

“Then that’s where we go,” Damu declared, a spark of hope igniting in his eyes.

He turned to the villagers, a somber gratitude filling him. “The royal army will return, seeking vengeance for their fallen comrades. You must leave this village. Head north, to the land of the Fasil Ghebbi tribe. They are bannermen to my father, they’ll offer you refuge.”

The villagers, their faces etched with gratitude and fear, readily agreed. Several young men, their eyes burning with newfound purpose, volunteered to join Damu’s quest. They had seen the brutality of the Kushit soldiers firsthand, and their own village lay in ruins. There was nothing left for them here.

Thus, the small band Damu had led south from the river swelled to a force of fifty. Their journey took them north, away from the village and towards the heart of the Fog Mountains, a place some called “cursed.” Seven days later, weary but determined, they reached their destination: the Oba’s palace, a majestic structure shrouded in perpetual mist.

What secrets awaited them within these ancient walls? Would the Dwarves possess the magic to heal the Imp? The answers, Damu knew, lay within the Oba’s domain.

The Black and Red Temple loomed before them, an imposing structure nestled within the vast black Oba’s castle. Carved from the very rock of the Fog Mountains, the castle itself was a testament to a bygone era.

Crumbling towers, remnants of its former glory, clawed at the mist-shrouded sky. Lady Huku of the Mushroom Clan, a legend whispered in the halls of time, had once held this domain as Bannerman to Tribe Hausa. But those were the days of gods and forgotten lore. Now, only the lower portion of the castle remained habitable, the rest surrendered to the relentless march of decay. Centuries before the Black and Red Temple rose, the spirits of dead Dwarf Kings had haunted these halls, their presence a chilling echo in the mountain's heart.

News of the Imp's recovery spread quickly. The healers of the Black and Red Temple, revered for their ancient knowledge, had managed to coax him back from the brink. A wave of a finger across his large nose revealed a faint puff of breath, a flicker of life returning to his still form.

"He's past the worst," the robed Guru of the Temple declared, his voice raspy with age. "The Pygmies are resilient, their blood carries the strength of the First Men."

Abiora emerged from the temple, her steps light as she descended the black rock path that led to the Oba's palace, a bustling town nestled within the mountain's embrace. Damu, his face scrubbed clean of the battle's grime, approached her as she traversed the bustling market.

"Thank you for saving my brother," Damu said, his voice sincere.

Abiora stopped and turned to face him, her gaze steady. “There’s no need for thanks. Healing is my duty, offered to all who need it.”

A flicker of something unreadable crossed her features. “Besides,” she continued, “you didn’t leave me much choice, did you? Wherever you go, it seems, death follows. Perhaps that is your destiny, and healing mine.”

Damu winced. The events at the village weighed heavily on him. “I never meant for that to happen,” he said quietly.

Abiora reached out and placed a hand on his arm, a surprising gesture of comfort. “I know,” she said, a hint of a smile gracing her lips. They continued their walk down the bustling market path.

Now clean-shaven, Damu looked younger, the harsh lines of battle temporarily erased. Abiora couldn’t help but notice the shift in his demeanor. The fierce warrior had given way to a young man grappling with the weight of his actions.

“You fight with the ferocity of a seasoned warrior,” she observed, “yet you carry the uncertainty of youth in your eyes. Tell me, Damu, is it true? Did you slay the Crown Prince?”

Damu met her gaze head-on. “Yes,” he admitted. “The Crown Prince was no exception to the laws of Alkeblan. As a Moran warrior, I am sworn to uphold them.”

Abiora studied him for a long moment. “You don’t need to justify yourself to me,” she finally said. “Your men follow you with unwavering loyalty, a testament to your

leadership. I have no doubt you acted according to your beliefs. But remember, even the most righteous deeds can have unintended consequences."

Damu's jaw clenched. He knew she spoke the truth. The weight of his actions, the ripple effect they would have across Alkeblan, pressed down on him like a physical burden. He had set in motion a chain of events he could barely comprehend. The fight for freedom, it seemed, had just begun, and the cost, he feared, would be high.

The green tendrils of dawn had just begun to creep through the window when a thunderous pounding of hooves shattered the peaceful silence. Damu jolted awake, heart hammering against his ribs. Beside him, Abiora stirred, a soft murmur escaping her lips.

He glanced down at her. Curled against him, her arm draped lightly across his chest, her warmth a stark contrast to the sudden chill that had gripped him. He lifted his head, his gaze drawn to the window. Below, in the valley, chaos reigned. Men in unfamiliar armor, a dark glint of silver catching the first rays of dawn, clashed with the Oba's guards. The rhythmic clanging of steel echoed off the mountain walls, punctuated by the sharp cries of the wounded.

Betho burst into the room, his face grim. "A siege, my lord! The valley below is under attack!"

Damu's blood ran cold. Who were these attackers? Why target the Oba's land? A knot of apprehension tightened in his stomach. The fragile peace they had found here seemed to be shattering with alarming speed.

He met Betho’s gaze, a silent question hanging in the air. “Who are they?”

Betho shrugged, his brow furrowed in concern. “We don’t know yet. But we’re about to find out.”

Damu rose from the bed, his hand instinctively reaching for the sword strapped to his back. A glance at Abiora, her eyes fluttering open, sent a pang of guilt through him. He didn’t want to drag her into this fight, but he couldn’t stand by while the Oba’s people were attacked.

Abiora, sensing his turmoil, sat up fully. Her eyes, usually sparkling with life, held a steely resolve. “Let’s go,” she said, her voice firm.

Damu was surprised. He hadn’t expected her to join him in the battle. “But...” he began, concern furrowing his brow.

Abiora cut him off, her gaze unwavering. “I may be a healer, but I’m not helpless. Besides,” she added, a hint of defiance in her voice, “I wouldn’t want you to think I’m afraid.”

Damu’s heart pounded with a mixture of conflicting emotions – admiration for her courage, worry for her safety, and a deepseated fear of what this new attack might portend. The fight for freedom, it seemed, would offer no respite. The path ahead was shrouded in uncertainty, and the lines between allies and enemies were blurring. But for now, Damu knew what he had to do. He would fight to protect the innocent, to find answers, and to pave the way for a future where peace might still be possible.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHIKU

Chiku awoke with a gasp, the stench of decay assaulting her senses. A bloated dog carcass lay beside her, maggots wriggling in its open maw. Nearby, a lifeless child lay sprawled grotesquely. Glancing away, she pressed on, her heart hammering against her ribs.

The place was a nightmare. How did she get here, slumped amongst the dead? A scrawny boy with a distended stomach and fever-bright eyes loomed behind her, pointing a skeletal finger downwards. Chiku realized with a jolt she was in a filthy alley, likely on the outskirts of a sprawling city.

In the distance, a cacophony of screams and shouts shattered the silence. “This can’t be good,” she muttered, a knot of dread tightening in her gut. “Run, child!” she urged, but the boy remained rooted to the spot. A siege of ragged boys, her age or older, emerged from the gloom, chasing an oversized boy who screamed a frantic plea in a language she didn’t understand.

Chiku didn’t understand the frantic shrieks the oversized boy yelled, but the terror in his eyes was universal. He sprinted for his life, a stark contrast to the chilling laughter of his pursuers. As they overtook him, Chiku squeezed her eyes shut, unable to watch the brutality unfold. This wasn’t a dream. This was real. The lifeless figures – the dog, the child, now the oversized boy – were a grim testament to that. Fear turned her legs to lead, but instinct screamed at her to move.

When she dared to open her eyes, the alley had vanished. In its place, a sheer stone wall met a beach littered with seaweed and abandoned fishing boats. The air smelled of salt and decay, an unsettling mix. A small fishing village clung to the hillside above, its windows dark and doors bolted shut. It was a scene of eerie silence, a ghost town by the sea.

Panic clawed at her throat. Where was everyone? Were they hiding, afraid of… of what? A castle, perched precariously on the cliff's edge, dominated the skyline. It wasn't like any castle she'd seen before – not like Ramshorn back in Khanduus. Maybe it held the explanation for this deserted village. But its imposing presence only deepened the mystery.

Chiku couldn't stay exposed. Skulking close to the wall, she used the shadows as cover, feeling like a hunted rabbit. The echo of her own ragged breaths filled her ears. "They wouldn't hurt me, would they?" she thought desperately. "They don't even know me." Nevertheless, her heart hammered a frantic rhythm against her ribs.

Suddenly, a flurry of movement caught her eye. A dozen boys her age, their faces painted with strange gold symbols, raced past, their laughter echoing off the silent buildings. Chiku shrank back, fear a constant companion. This island was a maze of terror, and she was lost within it.

She crept across the inner bailey, her heart hammering against her ribs. Uncertain of their allegiance, she crouched low beneath a rocky overhang, letting a group of ragged boys with eyes like hungry rats scurry past.

They weren’t the tunnel rats, the ones she truly feared. Emerging after a tense wait, Chiku realized the encounter had shaken her. Days spent underground had leached the vibrancy from her once bright eyes. Dirt smudged her skin, and her once-long hair, likely hacked off by dull shears, hung in shorn disarray. She couldn’t recall who had cut it, or when.

As she navigated the bustling market, whispers followed her like phantoms. “Rudi uliko were wa handaki,” they hissed, a curse urging her back to the suffocating darkness of the tunnels. This phrase, she’d learned on her seventh day in the stone town, held the weight of a thousand unspoken threats.

The tunnel rats, those scrawny boys forever etched in her memory, were responsible for the death of a young boy she’d witnessed, his blood staining the grimy stones. Haunted by the scene, she’d vowed never to join their ranks. The rest of the day blurred into a wearying trek. She wandered the town and its outskirts, avoiding the labyrinthine alleys that reeked of decay, encountering a kaleidoscope of faces – none the dwarflings of legend she’d dreamt of finding. Yet, despite her efforts, a slow transformation mirrored her deepening despair. Two months had passed without a cleansing bath, and the ever-present grit under her nails was a constant reminder of her capture in the unforgiving Kirua forests. Her once-white teeth were turning a dull cream, the ever-present film a constant reminder of skipped meals. Her friend Ndugu, the only one she could call such, had spoken of the ocean’s toll on teeth, but the truth was far grimmer. Hunger gnawed at her insides, a relentless

ache that echoed the hollowness in her mind. Seven days stolen from her memory, replaced by the harsh realities of the stone town. “Ndugu” – was this even her real name? The question echoed in the emptiness, a chilling premonition that her past held secrets best left buried.

The afternoon sun beat down mercilessly on the stone town. Chiku and Ndugu had spent the morning searching for work, their empty stomachs growling with each passing hour. Discrimination was as thick as the dust in the air – men with bulging muscles were offered backbreaking labor, while women needed an almost inhuman strength to be considered. Even the children, frail and skeletal, were deemed worthy only of the most hazardous mining jobs. Chiku shuddered, the memory of collapsing tunnels and lifeless bodies a horrifying echo.

“Twende mjini, ni rahisi kupata chakula,” Ndugu rasped, his voice rough with thirst.

“How many times...?” she began, frustration boiling over. But the words died on her lips. They had learned a smattering of each other’s language – mjini for town, chakula for food. A meager vocabulary for a desperate situation. Ndugu’s words were a bitter truth – they were running out of options. Desperation gnawed at Chiku, a cold dread settling in her gut. This town offered no solace, only a relentless struggle for survival. But somewhere, deep within the haze of her forgotten past, a flicker of hope remained. She had to find a way out, to reclaim her memories, and perhaps, even her identity.

The scent of hot bread, a sweet temptation compared to anything Chiku had smelled in recent memory, wafted from the shops lining the flour-dusted streets. She inhaled deeply, savoring the imaginary taste, until Ndugu materialized beside her, a half-eaten loaf clutched in his hand. A grateful smile tugged at her lips, a rare flicker of warmth in the face of their desperation.

Stealing food wasn't difficult. The real challenge was finding a safe haven for the night, a place untouched by the ever-present threat of the tunnel rats. Hunger gnawed at Chiku's belly as they navigated the bustling streets. A man wrestled a cart laden with grain, and another followed, the pungent aroma of dried fish filling the air. Her stomach rumbled in protest. "Tunapaswa kuiba samaki," Ndugu muttered, his voice laced with a desperation that sent a shiver down Chiku's spine.

"What?" she blurted, confusion momentarily eclipsing her hunger. The word "steal" felt alien on her tongue, a stark contrast to the life she couldn't remember.

Without waiting for a response, Ndugu darted after the fishmonger's cart, snatching a fish and ravenously devouring the head. Chiku rushed after him, panic clawing at her throat. The sight of Ndugu's wild hunger, a hunger that mirrored the desperation in his eyes, sent a fresh wave of fear coursing through her.

"Stop! We have bread," she pleaded, her voice barely a whisper. Stealing felt wrong, a seed of guilt taking root in her gut.

"Huwezi kupata chakula katika mji huu kama hutaiba," Ndugu retorted, his voice hoarse. "Come!" He darted

back to the alleyway, his movements practiced, honed by necessity.

Seeing his opportunity with the distracted vendor, Chiku joined Ndugu's escapade, guilt warring with hunger. They snatched more fish than they could possibly consume and disappeared into the labyrinthine alleyways. Sated but wary, they settled amidst the shadows to devour their bounty. Unlike Chiku, who picked at the flesh with a lingering unease, Ndugu relished the heads, leaving a pile of discarded fish bodies. A dilemma arose – what to do with the leftover food?

"It's getting dark. I'm heading to the beach," Ndugu announced, already stripping off his shirt and slinging it over his shoulder. The beach, with its openness, felt exposed to Chiku, a place vulnerable to watchful eyes.

"We still have fish," Chiku interjected. "What should we do with it?"

"Leave it there, the dogs will get it. Coming? Let's go for a swim." Ndugu's voice held a note of impatience, a simmering frustration that echoed Chiku's own.

Ignoring Ndugu's suggestion, Chiku began wrapping the leftover fish in scraps of cloth, her movements purposeful. He sauntered off, oblivious to her actions. "I could keep it for tomorrow, or maybe for supper tonight," she thought, a spark of defiance flickering in her eyes. But a nagging unease persisted. Stealing was a necessary evil, but where did it end? And what would they do if they were caught?

The afternoon sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the teeming market. Exhaustion gnawed at Chiku, her empty stomach a constant grumble. Dwarflings, their colorful costumes a mockery of the surrounding grime, cavorted on a raised platform, their high-pitched music a jarring counterpoint to the harsh cries of vendors. Filthy children, like famished rats, darted between stalls, snatching scraps of food with practiced ease.

A commotion near a fishmonger's stall snagged Chiku's attention. A woman, her face etched with worry, clutched a frail child. Unlike any Chiku had ever seen, the child possessed two heads, each with wide, haunted eyes. One head stared vacantly ahead, the other fixated on Chiku with a single finger probing its tiny nose. A pang of sympathy shot through Chiku. This child, marked by misfortune, mirrored her own strange situation.

The woman's voice, hoarse with desperation, haggled with the fishmonger. "Two coppers, that's all I have. My little one needs food."

The fishmonger, a burly man with a cruel twist to his lips, scoffed. "Two coppers for this prime fish? Get lost, woman, before I call the guards."

Shame flushed over Chiku. In that moment, a memory flickered – a grand table laden with exotic foods, laughter echoing in a high-vaulted hall. The image vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving behind a confusing emptiness. Ignoring the memory's echo, Chiku acted on impulse.

“I have fish,” she blurted out, surprising even herself. She rummaged in her makeshift bag, unwrapping the package of Ndugu’s bounty. “It has no head, but it’s good. Here.”

The woman’s eyes widened, filled with a mixture of disbelief and gratitude. “But... I only have one copper...”

“It’s enough,” Chiku insisted, a strange warmth blooming in her chest, pushing back the gnawing emptiness. The woman’s hesitant smile sparked a flicker of something unfamiliar within Chiku – a selfless act that left her strangely breathless. But the warmth was fleeting, replaced by a cold shard of worry. Ndugu had been gone for hours, lured by the promise of the beach at dusk. “I have to find him,” she muttered, a new resolve settling in her gaze. The woman’s thanks hung in the air as Chiku navigated the throng, the setting sun painting the sky in hues of worry, a color that mirrored the unease growing in her gut.

Clutching the remaining copper in her hand, Chiku weaved through the labyrinthine alleys below the flour street. Here, the sun barely penetrated the maze of twisting passages, and the air hung thick with a mix of sewage and spices. Potholes, larger than any she’d seen at the southern gate, threatened to swallow her whole. Unlike the bustling marketplace above, silence reigned here, broken only by the occasional cough or muffled curse. Keeping to the center for better visibility, she dodged the occasional stray dog or darting figure.

A whooping gang of children with red-painted faces, a stark contrast to the grimy anonymity most wore, tore

past her, chasing a terrified golden-faced boy. A surge of resentment tightened Chiku’s grip on her meager possession. Memories of the tunnel rats and their relentless taunts flashed in her mind. Attempts to find solace among the “reds” a month ago had resulted in a painful beating, a harsh lesson in unspoken social codes. Others, the wary ones with no facial markings, would vanish at her approach, their fear a constant reminder of her outsider status. Even children weren’t immune to the city’s harsh realities.

Just a week prior, a scrawny girl, twice her size, had ambushed her, attempting to steal her boots. Ndugu, her only companion in this unforgiving city, had intervened, the memory sparking a flicker of warmth amidst the gnawing loneliness. He was the only one who had offered her a semblance of companionship, a shared meal, and a place to rest her weary head.

A lone gull wheeled overhead as Chiku emerged from the oppressive alley onto a hill overlooking Tsetse Valley. The sight of the beach below, a canvas of golden sand dotted with carefree children, some playing naked in the fading light, sent a pang of longing through her. A gull, a creature reminiscent of Khanduus, her forgotten homeland, her mother, and her father. “I wish I could go home,” she whispered, a desperate plea lost in the gathering dusk. But for now, she had to find Ndugu. The beach, with its openness and unpredictable characters, held a different kind of danger. She had to find him before the shadows deepened, swallowing the remnants of trust and safety this strange city offered, however meager it might be.

With renewed determination, Chiku descended the dusty path, her gaze scanning the figures sprawled across the beach. The playful laughter of children gradually morphed into the raucous shouts of adults, a mixture of languages forming a discordant symphony. The scent of grilling fish mingled with the ever-present stench of the tide, a strange concoction that did little to settle her churning stomach.

The wharf, usually a cacophony of shouts and haggling, was cloaked in an unnatural silence. Chiku's unease deepened. Peering under a cluster of jagged rocks, she spotted two pairs of red-painted faces hunched over a shared meal, their eyes studiously avoiding hers. Two more figures, faces similarly adorned, walked along the sand, oblivious to her presence. This deserted stretch of beach held only three other figures – "reds" playing in the shallows, their movements clumsy parodies of Ndugu's graceful underwater dives. A cold dread snaked through Chiku as she watched them.

Reaching the base of the thirty-meter-high rocks, she looked up, her heart plummeting into her stomach. A group of tunnel rats held a figure captive, bound and blindfolded, his bare chest exposed. As they shoved him forward, a sickening crack echoed in the stillness. Chiku's grip slackened, the single copper coin slipping from her grasp. Screams erupted from the beach, but for Chiku, the world fell silent. A horrifying certainty bloomed in her mind – the limp figure, his once-familiar shirt hanging from Ndugu's arm that fateful afternoon, was her only friend. The blow had landed squarely on his

face, rendering him unrecognizable, yet an undeniable knowledge pulsed through her – it was Ndugu.

Hot tears welled in her eyes, blurring the scene before her. But unlike the screams of terror from the beachgoers, a different kind of sound rose within Chiku – a low, guttural growl that sent shivers down her own spine. It wasn't a sound of grief, but a primal echo of a fury she didn't recognize. The memory of the grand table from her forgotten past flickered in her mind, but this time, a distorted image replaced it – a banquet of vengeance, piled high with the bodies of those who had wronged her.

The warmth of the selfless act she had performed earlier that day, the flicker of something unfamiliar, was extinguished. In its place, a cold, steely resolve solidified. She wouldn't cry, not anymore. Tears were a luxury she couldn't afford. The single copper coin lay forgotten in the sand, a stark reminder of her failed attempt at kindness. From now on, there would be no more bartering, no more attempts to fit in. There would only be one purpose – a chilling vow whispered on the wind, a promise etched onto her very soul: she would find those responsible, and they would pay.

The silence that had descended upon Chiku was no longer one of emptiness, but a terrifying stillness that preceded a storm. The world seemed to hold its breath, the gulls overhead ceasing their cries as if in morbid respect. A single, chilling vow escaped her lips, barely a whisper yet heavy with the weight of a thousand unspoken threats: "I will find you."

The guttural growl echoed within her again, a primal urge clawing its way to the surface. Tears, once threatening to spill, evaporated in the heat of her newfound resolve. This wasn't grief, not entirely. It was a cold, steely determination that froze the blood in her veins. The flickering memory of the grand table from her past transformed yet again. This time, it wasn't a banquet of vengeance, but a war council. Strategies unfurled in her mind, each step a calculated move in a game where the stakes were life and death.

The forgotten copper coin glinted accusingly in the fading light. Kindness, it seemed, was a currency that held no value in this brutal world. Yet, a sliver of hope remained, a memory tucked away in a corner of her mind. The woman with the two-headed child, her hesitant smile, the spark of something unfamiliar within Chiku – a fleeting connection. Perhaps, just perhaps, there were others out there, ostracized souls who could understand her plight.

With newfound purpose, Chiku rose from the sand. The beach, once a canvas of carefree laughter, now held a chilling emptiness. The screams had subsided, replaced by a watchful silence. Every face seemed to hold a veiled suspicion, every shadow a potential threat. But Chiku was no longer afraid. Fear had been replaced by a cold, steely focus.

She wouldn't become a mindless instrument of vengeance, consumed by rage. No, she would be smarter, more cunning. She would use this city's underbelly to her advantage, navigate the labyrinthine alleys and hidden corners, forging alliances with the

outcasts, the forgotten ones. She would become a ghost, a whisper in the dark, a silent predator stalking her prey.

The hunt had begun, and the Tsetse Valley of stone city would never be the same. As Chiku disappeared into the throng of twilight shadows, a single, haunting thought echoed in the stillness: “They took everything from me. Now, they will face the storm.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ZAHUR.

The air hung thick with the acrid stench of urine, a pervasive foulness that seemed to seep into his very bones. Every so often, a fat drop of water would plop onto the slick black stones beneath his feet, the sound echoing like a tiny drumbeat in the oppressive silence. He strained his eyes in the gloom, but there was nothing to see. No window offered a sliver of light, no doorway promised escape. This was his world now: a cramped, suffocating cage of despair.

He remembered the moments before they’d shoved him in. The rough, pale brown stone walls were like a second skin to the dungeon, their surface slick with moisture and glistening with crystals of saltpeter. The stench had been different then, a choking cloud of dust and mildew that clung to his clothes and filled his lungs. But that had been nothing compared to the assault on his senses now.

The only interruption in the monotonous stone was the heavy oak door, its surface scarred and splintered, like the hide of some monstrous beast. Iron rivets studded its

surface like warts, their cold gleam offering a chilling contrast to the dull brown of the wood. He remembered the sickening thud as it had slammed shut behind him, the finality of the sound sealing his fate.

Then, there was darkness. Absolute, suffocating darkness. It pressed in on him from all sides, a physical weight that squeezed the air from his lungs. He was blind, entombed in this living grave. But even in the absence of sight, his other senses were assaulted. The smell, now magnified in the darkness, was a living entity, coiling around him like a venomous snake. It scraped at his throat, clawed at his eyes, and threatened to drown him in its fetid embrace.

In this suffocating darkness, his mind conjured horrors. He imagined unseen creatures scuttling across the floor, their legs skittering over the cold stones. He could almost feel their touch, a whisper against his skin that sent shivers down his spine. Every creak, every groan of the ancient building sent his heart hammering against his ribs. He was trapped, a prisoner not just of this physical cage, but of his own fear.

Days bled into weeks, then weeks into months. Each sunrise, a cruel reminder of another day stolen. The cold, damp dungeon became his only world, punctuated only by the jarring intrusion of the king’s guards. They would materialize like phantoms in the gloom, their heavy boots echoing on the slick stones as they dragged him, a broken puppet, before the queen.

The queen. He loathed the very word. A woman draped in silks and cruelty, her beauty as sharp and unforgiving

as the iron bars that likely separated him from the outside world. Each audience was a nightmarish dance, a cruel waltz of threats and defiance.

“Accept me as queen of the seventeen kingdoms!” she would screech, her voice a whip cracking in the stale air. “Bend the knee, Zahur, and I may show mercy to your traitorous kin.”

Mercy. The word tasted like ash in his mouth. He knew her promises were as empty as the space behind his own hollow eyes. “Never,” he would rasp, his voice hoarse from disuse. “The rightful king will sit upon the throne, not you the usurper.”

Her face would contort with rage, a mask of fury replacing the practiced beauty. Curses would spew from her lips, vile and venomous, each word a fresh lash across his already bruised spirit. A spittle-flecked hand would lash out, her touch as cold and foreign as the stones beneath his feet.

“Take him back!” she would shriek, her voice laced with a dangerous tremor. “Let him rot in his cell! Perhaps starvation will loosen that traitorous tongue of his!”

And back he would be dragged, his defiance a flickering ember in the suffocating darkness. The guards, ever silent observers in this macabre theatre, would manhandle him back to his fetid prison, the heavy oak door slamming shut with a finality that echoed the despair in his heart. He craved the king, a beacon of hope in this crushing darkness, but the queen seemed to hold him at bay, a twisted game of control where Zahur was the unwilling pawn.

Zahur drifted in and out of consciousness, the line between sleep and the suffocating darkness blurring. A sound, faint at first, pierced the silence. Footsteps. They echoed down the hallway, each thud a jolt against his addled mind. Had he dreamt them? It had been an eternity since the rhythmic tramp of the guards shattered the dungeon’s silence.

He fought to open his eyes, heavy lids like lead weights. His throat was a furnace, his lips cracked and bleeding. A wracking cough tore from his chest, a harsh rasp that echoed in the confines of his cell. He ran a hand over his face, wincing at the unfamiliar gauntness beneath his fingertips. The fever, a constant companion now, had etched deep lines across his face, carving years onto his features in a matter of weeks. The once-proud Zahur stared back at him from the reflection of his despair in the damp stone floor. He was a stranger to himself, a hollowed-out shell of the man he once was. Yet, a flicker of defiance, a spark of hope, remained stubbornly alive in his chest.

The heavy oak door creaked open, a shaft of light splitting the suffocating darkness. Zahur flinched, his eyes squeezed shut against the sudden assault. Strength seemed to have leached from his very bones, and raising his eyelids felt like lifting a stone slab.

A crude hand shoved a calabash into his grasp. The long, carved neck felt cool and smooth beneath his feverish fingers. Water. The word echoed in his parched mind, a desperate plea answered. He sucked at the gourd, the cool liquid a shock to his raw throat. It dribbled down his

chin, soaking his beard, but he drank until his stomach lurched with a fullness he hadn’t known in weeks.

“Is the king still alive…?” he rasped, his voice rough and unfamiliar.

The jailer, an old man whose beard rivaled Zahur’s in length but seemed to possess a life of its own, regarded him with rheumy eyes. He was even more gaunt than Zahur, a skeletal frame draped in loose rags. “Perhaps,” the jailer rasped, his voice like dry leaves rustling in the wind. “Perhaps not.” He reached out, his hand surprisingly strong, and snatched the calabash from Zahur’s grasp.

“Please,” Zahur croaked, a sliver of hope extinguished. The heavy door slammed shut, plunging him back into the suffocating darkness. He blinked, his vision adjusting to the gloom, and lowered his head onto his chest. The straw beneath him felt… different. No longer did it reek of stale urine, dead rats, and excrement. It simply… didn’t smell. Had they cleaned the cell? A spark of curiosity flickered amongst the ashes of despair. Perhaps there was more to this sudden offering of water than just a cruel twist of the knife. Perhaps… just perhaps… there was a reason for hope after all.

In the suffocating embrace of darkness, days and nights blurred into a monotonous existence. Zahur measured the passage of time solely by the erratic arrival of his jailer, a spectral figure bearing the only solace he knew – a single calabash of water. With each gurgle and swallow, Zahur would convince himself a day had

passed, another torturous chapter added to his unending ordeal.

At first, fueled by a sliver of hope, he'd bombarded the jailer with questions: the king's fate, the state of the kingdom, anything to pierce the veil of his isolation. But his pleas were met with grunts, shoves, or worse, a swift kick that sent him sprawling across the damp floor. As hunger gnawed at his insides, the pleas for information morphed into desperate begs for food. But the silence, thick and suffocating like the dungeon air, remained his only answer. Perhaps, Zahur thought with a bitter twist of his lips, the Queen, the usurper Amina, truly intended for him to starve.

The weight of despair pressed down on him. A fleeting moment of insanity had him concocting a ridiculous plan – to bribe the jailer with a coin he didn't possess. "Just bend the knee," a traitorous voice whispered within him. "Endure this humiliation, and return to Belkis. Watch little Jirani hit his target with an arrow, make Hami the Chieftain of Khanduus." The thought of his family, a beacon of warmth in the icy grip of despair, was what kept him tethered to sanity. But the darkness had a way of twisting even the brightest memories, and soon, even those became a distant echo, a whispered promise lost in the endless night. Buried in the suffocating darkness, with only fleeting glimpses of hope and the gnawing hunger, Zahur was left with nothing but his own thoughts, a dangerous companion at best.

Down here, in the bowels of the earth, Zahur clung to the memories of his family. Visions of Jirani, his little one with eyes as bright as sunrise, danced behind his closed

eyelids. Hami, his eldest son, a man already by now, his image a pillar of strength in Zahur's fading mind. And Adia, his lovely girl, unseen for years. The thought of her, lost and afraid somewhere in this cruel world, twisted a fresh knot of worry in his gut. "She must be scared wherever she is," he rasped, the words catching in his dry throat.

mories of Damu and Akina near and dear to his heart, flickered like dying embers. The last remnants of a proud Niss lineage, their faces etched in his fading memory. "Ah, Akina," he murmured, his voice a mere whisper against the damp stone walls.

"Chiku," he remembered. Their journey to the lighthouse with Damu and Akina ended in abduction by the crown prince. Fear must have gripped her then. Months had passed, and Chiku remained missing, vanished like morning dew. "Where could she be?" he'd ask himself in the quiet darkness.

There was solace in knowing Damu was searching for her. But the question loomed: where? Beja, near Kirua, might be where she'd end up if she went north. Yet, at eight years old, navigating wouldn't be a priority. Lost, scared, and traumatized, she could be hiding in some rocks, waiting for her father's return, just like that time in Khanduus. Chiku had wandered alone in the woods then, hiding under a rock for three days until Zahur found her. The horrifying possibility gnawed at him – Chiku sold into slavery, perhaps on a ship bound for Zanzibar. The thought was unbearable. He clung to the memory of Chiku, lost but found under a rock in Khanduus, a beacon of hope in the encroaching

darkness. Yet, the agonizing truth was that Chiku might never be found. His hand, gnarled and weak, reached out, seeking solace in the cold embrace of the cell. A wracking cough tore through him, leaving him weak and gasping for breath. He leaned against the unforgiving stone, seeking any shred of comfort.

“Chiku,” he rasped, the name a plea lost in the suffocating darkness. “Is she dead too?” The question hung heavy in the air, a desperate hope battling with a rising tide of despair. “Maybe not, she can’t be dead,” he whispered, his voice cracking with a desperate need for denial. Tears, a release he craved, welled up in his eyes, but they refused to fall. The well of his emotions, like his body, had been drained to a parched emptiness. He was left with only the ghosts of his loved ones, haunting him in the relentless darkness.

A clatter of iron chains shattered the oppressive silence. The dungeon door creaked open, a shaft of light lancing through the gloom. Zahur squinted, his hand pressed against the damp stone wall as he pushed himself upright.

“Food,” he croaked, his voice hoarse from disuse.

“Wine,” a gruff voice replied. It wasn’t the usual jailer, this one shorter and clad in leather ill-concealed beneath his ill-fitting jailer’s garb. Oyat.

“Drink, Chieftain Zahur,” Oyat rasped, thrusting a wineskin into Zahur’s hand. “You look like a shadow of your former self.”

Zahur grasped the wineskin, the feel of it a foreign sensation in his calloused hands. He took a tentative sip, the wine a fiery caress against his raw throat. A rumble echoed from his stomach, a long-forgotten sound. He drank again, deeper this time, a sliver of warmth spreading through his chilled limbs.

“Here to finish the job?” Zahur rasped, his voice laced with suspicion.

Oyat snorted. “The last one who wants you dead, Chieftain. Your survival is the only hope for peace.”

Zahur studied Oyat, the glint of defiance slowly returning to his eyes. “If I asked you something, Oyat, would you answer truthfully?”

Oyat hesitated, then dipped his head in a curt nod. Zahur finished the wineskin, the silence stretching between them heavy with unspoken questions.

“The king,” Zahur finally rasped. “Is he alive?”

Oyat’s face remained impassive. “I don’t know.”

A lie. Zahur scoffed inwardly. Oyat, the Lord of Whispers, wasn’t some ignorant jailer. Spies were his eyes and ears, a vast network woven across Alkebulan that left nothing unheard. Oyat knew everything, from the king’s breakfast menu to the chirp of a sparrow in a distant province. The truth about the king was locked away behind that stoic facade, a valuable pawn in Oyat’s game of secrets. Zahur knew better than to voice his suspicions. Oyat was a dangerous enigma, a man who wielded secrets like weapons. But for now, the embers of hope had been rekindled. The king might be alive. And

that, in the suffocating darkness of his cell, was all that mattered. For now.

A chuckle, dry and humorless, escaped Zahur's lips. He took another swig from the wineskin, the wine offering a brief respite from the gnawing emptiness in his stomach. "Is that so, Oyat?" he rasped, his voice laced with skepticism. "The Lord of Whispers, with ears supposedly in every corner of Alkebulan, claims ignorance about the King's health? That's a hard pill to swallow, even for a starving man."

Oyat threw back his head and drained the last of the wine from the wineskin, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Believe me, Zahur," he rasped, his voice rough, "my spiders have crawled every wall in Cairo, scoured the city streets, even explored the dusty corners of the pyramids. They've found nothing. I know what the Queen's plotting for breakfast tomorrow, but the King? Not a whisper, not a single web catches a tremor about his whereabouts."

He paused, his gaze sharp. "But here's what I do know. Alkebulan's about to erupt in chaos if you don't bend the knee. Cudjoe's dead, murdered, and whispers of rebellion have roared through the streets of Akan. The chiefs are fractured, Zahur. Fayum, Kunta Kinte, and Aksum in the north still hold loyalty to Khanduus, but the south? Memphis and the Pete Lands have fallen under the iron fist of the Kush. Damram, that snake, sits on the throne now, having purged every leader loyal to Cudjoe in a bloody coup."

Oyat's words struck a deep chord within Zahur. He'd left Belkis in Memphis under Cudjoe's protection. If the man was dead, Belkis... his heart hammered a frantic tattoo against his ribs. Perhaps, a traitorous thought slithered through his mind, if he'd just given the Queen what she wanted, he wouldn't be here, rotting in this cell. Belkis wouldn't be in danger.

"My wife," he rasped, the word thick with worry. "What news of my wife?"

Oyat's words slammed into Zahur like a battering ram. "Your wife," he rasped, "fled to Fayum. Your Morans stationed in Matamba joined her. She's called upon all your banners, and her father's lion-riding clans as well." He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know what this means, don't you? This is the very war you were trying to prevent."

Zahur felt a cold dread grip his heart. "We both know, Oyat," he said, his voice thick with despair, "we can't allow the Kush to rule our lands. You know what they are, what they do. I can't be the one to put that monster Queen on the throne. I'd rather die in this cell."

Oyat sighed, a weary sound. "What about your daughter? If your pride won't bend for yourself, perhaps it will for sweet Adia. She was nearly reunited with Belkis before some scoundrel sold her to Damram. Now she's with the Queen." He paused, letting the weight of that revelation sink in. "For Adia's sake, Zahur, consider the Queen's demands. Call off your banners, tell Belkis to stand down. And your son, Hami – he refused his mother's call and sails for Meroe with some Nubian prince, if I heard

right. Make your decision quickly, Zahur, before things spiral out of all control."

A whirlwind of emotions warred within Zahur. The thought of Belkis leading a desperate charge against the Kush filled him with terror. Adia, his precious daughter, a pawn in a twisted game of power. Hami, his headstrong son, sailing into uncharted waters. The weight of his family's fate, the future of his homeland, pressed down on him like a suffocating cloak. He had to choose. But could he swallow his pride, kneel before a usurper, and condemn his people to a brutal reign under the Kush? The answer hung heavy in the air, as thick and oppressive as the darkness that surrounded him.

Despair threatened to engulf Zahur, a thick, suffocating fog that choked any flicker of hope. He clutched the empty wineskin, a poor substitute for the answers he craved. Belkis, his fierce wife, leading a desperate charge against the Kush... the very image sent shivers down his spine. Adia, his little flower, trapped in the Queen's clutches. Hami, ever the independent one, sailing towards an uncertain future. All the burdens of his family, his people, weighed heavily upon him.

He closed his eyes, the darkness within mirroring the darkness around him. Could he betray his principles, kneel before a tyrant and condemn his people to the Kush's cruelty? The thought was a bitter pill to swallow. But the alternative... Belkis, perhaps even Adia, lost in a bloody conflict.

A hollow chuckle escaped his lips, a sound devoid of humor. A terrible choice, a prisoner's dilemma. He was a

man broken, a once-proud chieftain reduced to a pawn in a deadly game.

Suddenly, the sound of receding footsteps reached his ears. He opened his eyes to see Oyat silhouetted against the faint light filtering through the cracked door. The Lord of Whispers paused, his form casting an elongated shadow on the damp stone floor.

“Goodbye, my friend,” Oyat said, his voice a low murmur. The words held a strange weight, a hint of something unspoken. Then, with a creak that echoed in the oppressive silence, the door slammed shut, plunging Zahur back into the suffocating darkness.

Alone with his tormenting thoughts, Zahur knew a decision had to be made. But as the hours crawled by, marked only by the dripping of water and the gnawing in his stomach, he remained trapped in a vortex of despair, unable to grasp the single, fragile thread of hope that Oyat’s parting words might have offered.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ADIA

The city of cairo, others would call it, *the city of kings.* At its apex Cairo was the greatest city in Alkeblan the center of civilization. Within its shining tall walls and vast pyramids, Adia found Cairo her prison, she had been held in her new room for a fortnight, ever since she was taken from Memphis by men she had never seen. At first she was worried about aunt Ayana who she had left pleading with kwame “Take me instead, its me they want

not her” Ayana had pleaded, knees on ground in front of Kwame. “Chieftain Damram wants the girl, not you,” Kwame had replied frantically before he took a full leather bag of coins.

Damram’s men rode in the dead of the night on horsebacks and a carriage for Adia and after three days, they had crossed the Congo kingdoms, through Mali and Gibat, they would rest at a keep of some chief or a holdfast they could come across. Sometimes they would spend a night in a tavern and Adia would be given a room, and a guard would stay at her door until morning came. One night they slept in the woods, with a small fire burning, but Adia wouldn’t, wink, she wouldn’t make a mistake, sleeping around these strangers. The men would feed her, Rockbans, salty bread, roasted cassava or sweet potatoes. At times the bowman would shoot a bird, and Adia would get a wing, or a leg depending on what was there.

At first she had refused to eat, and after a couple of hours, her stomach had started paining and losing her sense of sight until she eat the bread.

The next days they rode through plain lands of Mossi and valleys, through the smoky hills of Naiva and the desert of Kano. There had been a battle in Kano by the time they arrived, women and children had died in a bloody fight, “the fighting must have happened four days ago” one of her captors said.”

When Adia looked, a raven was plucking an eye from a dead boy’s carcass, houses had been burned and

livestock claimed and the rest of the people had fled. Adia was scared, everything was happening so first.

“Damn Hanuku,” she cursed. “why did you have to take me away from my friends.” She cursed the Chancellor Musa for dying so fast, she cursed Kwame and Damram for abducting her and she cursed herself for being a stupid child and weak.

Along the way she never spoke to any of her captors and they never said a word to her either, all she could do was cry softly to herself and worry about what would come to her. She worried about Hanuku, her shield, her sword, a warrior who was not supposed to leave her side.

They must have locked him away or killed him, she worried about her new friend Welete Wabi. “Would she want to find me, if she new I was taken?” she asked herself.

The journey had taken seven days until they arrived to the city gates, tall and vast. Adia had passed through these same Green gates with a Yoonir star engravings in the middle of it. a few times with her aunt Ayana and her husband Musa every time they were visiting Cairo, the City of kings. The Giza pyramid stood in the middle of the city, so vast and tall, A bronze Yoonir star standing on the high point end of the pyramid. Adia had always wanted to visit the pyramid but Musa would not let her. “it’s not a good place for a young girl, only for king’s men, your auntie will take you to Ghardaia palace instead, you will meet other kids there” Musa had said to her, but that was a long time ago.

And now she remembered the Musa, an old man who had taken her for a daughter he has never had. Last she heard, he was dead. Murdered by the Kushits her aunt had alleged.

In the tower room at the heart of Manjakamiadane Rova, Adia gave herself to the darkness. She drew the curtains around her bed, slept, woke weeping, and slept again. When she could not sleep, she lay on the floor shivering with fear. Servants came and went, bringing meals but her sight of food was more than she could bear. The dishes piled up on the table beneath her window, untouched and spoiling until the servants took them away again.

Adia was standing at her window staring at the Yoonir star that was on top of Giza pyramid, it's bronze color reflecting on the sun. She looked at the Giza, a triangle structure with small triangle window holes. She thought of her father, *he could be underneath that thing, in one of those dungeons.* Adia had read the history of the pyramid of Giza, that it was where the throne room was and the king's chambers, and when the king was dead, he would be taken underneath the crypts for eternity rest.

"Many kings lie under that thing" she thought.

She feared if her father was haunted by the dead kings of the old age, but all were just thoughts and questions without answers. Her door opened and Shehu walked in "The queen will see you now" he said.

The walls of the throne room were different, not the same as when she last been here with Chieftain Musa during that days of the king.

Before the throne room was decorated with hunting tapestry and now everything was taken down and the walls were bare.

Shehu went to take his place on the right-hand side of his sister and beside two of other men, his uncle.....